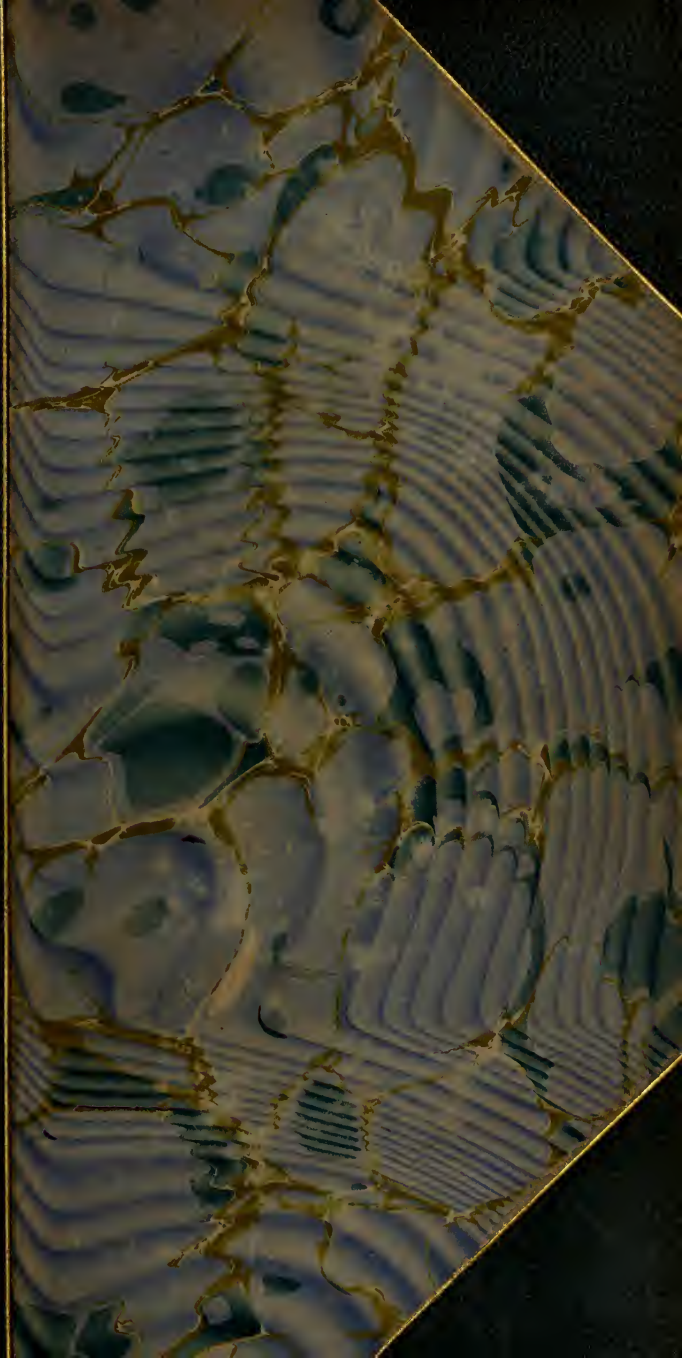

JEDWOOD JUSTICE

A Novel

BY

ALBANY DE FONBLANQUE

AUTHOR OF

'A TANGLED SKEIN,' 'CUT ADRIFT,' 'BAD LUCK,' ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

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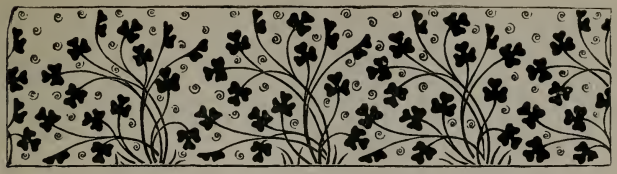

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JEDWOOD JUSTICE

CHAPTER I.

A KNOCK-DOWN BLOW.

THERE was quite a scene in Fairlock Churchyard as the congregation were coming out from morning service one bright November Sunday in the year 1880.

Fairlock is a small town in Hopshire, and there were some two score worshippers in its parish church on the day in question. They came forth in dissolving knots of twos and threes, some stopping

to have a talk, some stopping to stare. Last of all, in accordance with his rank and the position of his pew, came the Lord of the Manor, Sir Claude Gault, with his pale wife by his side. They had traversed half the distance between the church porch and the gate, where their carriage awaited them, and were in full view of all, when a young man joined them on Lady Gault's side. Their hands met for a moment, and he whispered something in her ear. Then Sir Claude stepped back, struck the intruder a heavy blow from behind—which sent him rolling amongst the tombstones—and seizing his wife roughly by the arm, hurried her to the carriage. Those whom they overtook on the road saw that her ladyship had fainted.

The cause of this affray was found in a worse plight. The blow he had received

on the back of his neck was a heavy one, and in falling his head had struck a stone. It was what the followers of a certain noble Marquis would call a 'clean knock out.'

This was a sad thing to happen on a Sunday, and coming out of church most shocking. The good folks of Fairlock seemed to think that they might, somehow, be blamed for it, so they retired in quick order, rallied at the gate, and each one told another what somebody ought to do. The fallen youth was not of Fairlock. He was young Mr. Birkett, of Wadehurst. What business had he to come to church five miles from his own parish, and make this scandal? What would Mr. Barbour say?

The Rector of Fairlock, to whom this question referred, came hurriedly upon the

scene from the vestry door, bareheaded, followed by his wife and two little daughters, one of whom—the elder—outran him, flung herself upon the delinquent, and in a voice of genuine sympathy, sharpened by fear, cried:

'Oh! it's Dick! Dear Dick! what is it? Oh, Dick! He is bleeding—he will die!'

The Rev. Mr. Barbour stopped short as he heard this name, and what he said was:

'Bless my soul! why am I misinformed? They told me it was Mr. Birkett, and it is only Mr. Richard.'

The Honourable Frank Birkett—usually called *Mr.* Birkett—was the only son and heir of Lord Wadehurst; and Richard—usually called 'Dick'—was his cousin. The relationship was a near one, but from

the point of view taken by good Mr. Barbour there was an Atlantic of social distinction between them. It would have indeed been a dreadful thing if the heir-apparent to a peerage had been knocked down in his churchyard; but it was 'only Mr. Richard.' That comforted him a little.

'Come away, Stella,' he said sharply to the child. 'How can you be so forward? This is most unbecoming, and—and you are soiling your dress.'

By this time the little girl had Dick's head in her lap, and the pretty white gown was stained with crimson.

This blood, though not precisely noble, had to be stanched somehow, so Dick, who had opened his eyes and tried to get up, was half led, half carried, into the vestry, where he was wholly revived, and

the hole in his head fastened up by the village doctor. One of the first things he did upon regaining full consciousness was to hold out his hand to little Stella and say:

'Ah, Dormouse! was it you?' for he saw the stain on her frock.

Then followed the inevitable investigation.

'Tell me now,' said the Rector, 'how this dis—how this most unhappy affair began.'

'Began? Why, by his knocking me down—and ended there.'

'But you must have given him some provocation.'

'Not a bit.'

'Stella,' said Mr. Barbour to the child, who was listening—her great brown eyes roused with interest, tears on her cheeks,

and indignation in her heart—'take your sister home; and, my dear,' this to his wife, 'perhaps you had better leave us.'

For all answer Mrs. Barbour took a chair and arranged her skirts.

The speaker noted this insubordination with a dry 'ahem,' and continued to Dick:

'You have been a good deal at the Manor House lately?'

'Yes—just as usual.'

'Has Sir Claude forbidden you to visit there?'

'Why, I lunched with them on Friday at his own invitation.'

'Dear me! Was her ladyship present?'

'Certainly. Why do you ask?'

'Oh, nothing; only——'

'Why beat about the bush, my dear?' interposed Mrs. Barbour. 'It is your duty, as a clergyman, to let this young

man know what has been the common talk of the village for some time, and to warn him. Although he is not a parishioner, Sir Claude is; and so you have a right to speak.'

'Just so, my love, just so. Well, er—it is very painful, and of course her ladyship is not to blame. No one would *think* of attaching any impropriety to *her;* but, er——'

'Please go on, sir,' said Dick. His face had regained its colour, and his eyes sparkled. 'This is getting interesting. Lady Gault is not to be blamed—for what?'

'For your too frequent visits at the Manor House,' interposed Mrs. Barbour sharply.

Dick gave a long, low whistle and changed colour.

'So the brute is jealous, is he?'

'I will not sit here and allow you to call Sir Claude "a brute,"' said the Rector.

'He *is* a brute, Mr. Barbour, and you know it,' retorted outspoken Dick. 'Why, supposing what you say—what you've been told, I mean—is true? No, hang it! that won't do, either. Supposing your confounded gossips *say* it's so, and the scandal has reached him—what does he do? Comes up behind me and knocks me down without a word. Coming out of church, too! That's a delicate sort of hint, isn't it?'

'Sir Claude is quick-tempered.'

'I cannot understand why you should stick up for him. You know he uses his wife shamefully.'

'That is no reason,' interposed the

Rector's wife, 'why you should exasperate him by flirting with her.'

'Oh, Mrs. Barbour! How can you listen to such nonsense? Why, they might as well say I am flirting with Dormouse.'

'I strongly object to your giving my daughter that ridiculous name,' observed the Rector stiffly. 'We will not prolong this most unpleasant conversation. I feel sure that our impression is correct. You have deeply offended Sir Claude by your unthinking—I place it no worse than that—your unthinking conduct. He was certainly a little—er, *brusque*, you know; but really you are the most to blame.'

'You are ridiculously unjust to me!' exclaimed Dick with some warmth, and rising; 'but you've made up your minds, and it's no use arguing with you. Will

you please send someone to the Crown for my dog-cart? I don't want to walk through the village in this plight.'

As he drove off he muttered to himself: 'My God, how unfortunate! and I *must* see her again!'

Amongst those overtaken by the Manor House carriage were Lady Gault's maid walking home with Mr. Spaulding, the stud-groom, and chaperoned by Mrs. Goodlake, the housekeeper. These, seated near the door, were with the first to leave the church, and had not lingered by the way, consequently they knew nothing of what others were discussing, freely, as 'the row.'

Sir Claude stopped the carriage and shouted, 'Here! you Martin! come and attend to your mistress; she's ill. They keep that church so confoundedly hot,'

he added, as the girl reached the step, 'that——' Here his tone changed. 'If you look at me that way again, you jade,' he muttered through clenched teeth, 'I will wring your —— neck!'

She turned and faced him.

'You have said that before, Sir Claude, and I gave you fair warning——'

'Well go, and be —— *I* don't want you. Settle it with your mistress when you bring her to, Spitfire! I'll walk. Get in and attend to your duty.'

He sauntered on moodily, till he came to where a little brook crossed the road, spanned by a plank bridge with a hand-rail on one side for foot-passengers. Here he stopped, lit a pipe, leaned over the rail, and gazing into the bright waters as they dashed on, summed up the position in these two words:

'*Damned fool!*'

The condemnation was uttered *to* himself, *at* himself, and had deeper cause than the events of that particular day. It was not caused because he had struck Dick Birkett, or because he had bullied his wife into a fainting fit, or because he had put himself in a position to be snubbed by her maid. These were only some of the fruits of his folly—its root was having a wife at all.

'What good is she?' he asked himself. 'She won't have children; she doesn't get on with my friends; she's no companion to me. Afraid to ride; too delicate to walk; too confoundedly pious to let things slide, as she might, with her "Oh dear, Claude, how wicked!" and her "Oh dear, Claude, you don't love me any longer!" and her whimperings and her tears! If

she'd only show some pluck—hit back, by Jove!' (with a laugh) 'as Spitfire did just now! What eyes she has! She's twice as handsome as my flaxen doll!'

Such was Sir Claude's opinion, on a matter of taste upon which many admirers of female beauty might differ with him; but the one woman was his wife, and the other wasn't. That was enough to settle his judgment. Frances Lady Gault was tall and slim, and exquisitely fair. Mary Martin was tall and slim, with the raven black hair and violet blue eyes of the race from which she sprang. The maid could wear her mistress's gowns with but little alteration, and move in them as though to the manner born. That is one of the tests. You can dress up man or woman as smartly as you can: you have to see how

they *move* in their clothes before you get the effect.

As to speech—another test—Mary's voice was soft and low, and—thanks to her well-educated mother—perfectly correct. To sum up, the one had beauty but no spirit; the other had both spirit and beauty.

* * * *

'He's been at it again,' observed Mr. Spaulding, as the carriage repassed with Martin and her fainting mistress.

'Poor lady!' said the housekeeper, half to herself.

'*Poor* lady indeed!' was the stud-groom's comment, with a scoff. 'Why don't she show some spirit? If I was a woman, and any man treated me as he treats her, I'd up and leave him.'

'Lady Gault is too good a woman to think of such a thing.'

'*Is* she now? Then what brings that Mr. Dick about the place three and four times a week?'

'Mr. Richard Birkett,' the old housekeeper replied demurely, 'has known my lady all her life. They are like brother and sister.'

'I've heard that sort of excuse before,' said Mr. Spaulding; 'and it made no difference. They *ain't* brother and sister—are they? Did her own brothers and sisters drive ten miles to see her every two days when they lived here? Not they! Why, I saw him in church just now, and he lunched at the house Friday!'

'You mind your own business, Mr. Spaulding,' said the old servant sharply. 'I've been—child, girl, wife and widow—

in one place forty-five years, and I never knew any good come of servants prying about their masters and mistresses.'

'Ye-s,' the stud-groom replied, picking up a piece of grass and chewing it; 'you've been forty-five years bottled up in the country in one place—that's why, Mrs. Goodlake.'

Fairlock Manor House was one of those old-fashioned, rambling, red-brick granges in which artists delight. Birket Foster has drawn it over and over again. Once it had a moat all round it, but one of Sir Claude's predecessors filled up that part of it which was at the back, and expanded the rest into an ornamental lake, over the narrowest part of which a bridge (corresponding with the style of the house) was thrown, replacing the old 'draw,' and forming a handsome approach.

To do this he had to divert the Spark, hardly more than a trout-stream at that point, and so got a picturesque pond and four law-suits. The millers below said he robbed them of their water; the farmers even said he caused their lands to be flooded. There was always either too much or too little going over the Fair-lock dam; and down to the time at which this story commences, these troubles continued in a more or less acute form.

Lord Wadehurst—lord of the adjacent manor — was especially hard to please. 'It seems,' sarcastically observed a learned judge whilst trying one of the numerous actions brought by his lordship on this account, 'that the defendant is required to regulate the flow of this brook to a teaspoonful.'

The extensive lawns and flower-gardens

were laid out in a style which some in these days would call 'prim.' For many years there had been no Lady Gault with a taste for gardening; but the wealth and beauty of the trees—the grand, spreading, centuries-old yews, the graceful beeches, the massive oaks, and (down by that incorrigible brook) the poplars, shimmering silver to every breeze—redeemed all shortcomings in other respects.

Inside, the house was full of quaint nooks and corners, unexpected passages, and old stairways—a novel place to play hide-and-seek in, a place swarming with pegs for effective decoration.

When the present Sir Claude made up his mind to marry, he placed his house in the hands of an artist, who was also an upholsterer, and this man actually revelled in the wealth of his opportunities.

Few ladies in all the land had a home so fair as that in which Frances Gault wept day after day, and wished she had never been born.

Once, about a year after her marriage, she plucked up spirit, left that lovely but wretched home, and sought refuge with her parents in London. Some hard words passed between her father and Sir Claude, and eventually she was talked over by her brother, a very discreet and world-wise person, into returning under a treaty of peace, which—like many of those of which we read in history—was never, never to be broken. Gradually Sir Claude slid back into his old ways, and now we know how he is regarded.

Later on that Sunday afternoon when Dick Birkett was 'knocked out,' Mr. Spaulding rode into the village, and

on his return found Mary Martin on the bridge feeding the swans.

Apropos of something that had been already said, he began :

'He's all right—got a cut in the head, that's all. Don't go.'

'I must ; my poor lady is very anxious.'

'Wait a bit. Has Mother Goodlake been talking to you about this ?'

'No—not a word.'

'Coming home from church, when you got into the carriage, she preached us a sermon about servants not minding what's going on about them. She's an old fool ! I know a pair who are drawing three hundred a year—cash down as regular as the clock on quarter-day—for keeping their eyes and their ears open. D'ye mind ?'

'I wouldn't hurt my poor lady for all the money in the bank,' said Mary.

'Who's talking about *hurting* her? I'm all for her side,' replied the stud-groom. 'Did you notice that new dairymaid in church, with her silk dress and kid gloves? What's she doing here?'

'You mustn't speak to me about her' (bridling).

'Well, I won't, then; but it would be a jolly good job for your lady if she got a divorce.'

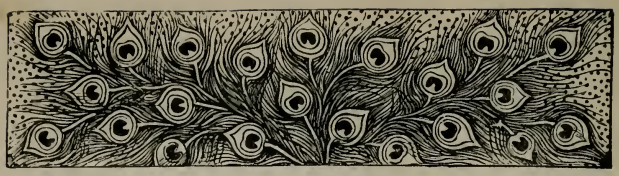
'She does not want one.'

'More fool she! *He'd* jump at a chance, and that's why we've got to be careful.'

'*We?*'

'Yes, *we*. You can't leave the house whenever you've a mind to, and run around the country, as *I* can. Dick

Birkett's dead in love. There'll be fetching and carrying; and the longer it goes on, and the safer it's made, the better for you and me, Miss Mary.'



CHAPTER II.

OLD BOGEY.

Sidney Danvers Birkett, seventh Baron Wadehurst, was a disappointed man, and a sour. During a temporary obscuration of his evil star, he was born an elder son; and, for its private ends, it allowed him to succeed to the title, but in all other respects it had its wicked way of him. Whilst in *statu pupillari*, at school or university, he was usually second for the prizes or honours which sanguine friends or toadies booked for him. He very nearly got to be head boy at Rugby, and missed the

Wranglers' list afterwards by just six marks. The woman he loved married his younger brother, and the constituency he had nursed for years jilted him at a turning-point in his political career for the father of the present Sir Claude Gault—a mere country bumpkin, who hobnobbed with farmers in all houses, and did not know an equation when he saw it.

His ideas were formed at a time when the manly morality of the Tom Hughes school had degenerated into priggishness. At Cambridge he was one of a choice band of philosophers who were to regenerate mankind — grave young persons, with aims and systems of their own, and a lofty contempt for anyone who ventured to disagree with them. They worshipped each other, and played 'Hail to the Chief!' with variations, on each other's trumpet; but a

ribald boating man called them '*The society for teaching grandmothers to suck ducks' eggs*;' and, sad to relate, they were known as 'The Suckers' for many a day.

In some respects Lord Wadehurst resembled the much-quoted householder who never served on a jury without finding himself bound up with eleven idiots. From his 'Sucker' period onwards he found his path to fame obstructed by the stupidity of his fellow-men. Just as the 'Flying Irishman' might be delayed, or even derailed, by a few clods on the line, so (in his own estimation) his lordship's career was blocked by the ignorance of the age. He started to be at least a Cabinet Minister, and ended as an Under-Secretary in the House of Lords.

During his brief official life he made himself a terror. The organization of his

department was defective throughout, and had to be reformed. He warned everyone, from the housekeeper upwards. He quarrelled with his chief in the House of Commons. He easily obtained the lasting enmity of the permanent officials, with the inevitable result—his own defeat.

At home he instituted the same methods which had, for a time, made the —— Office into a penitentiary. Reports were exacted from the butler; minutes issued for the government of the stables, and memoranda for the housekeeper's room. If an under-gardener did something wrong, he was required to 'tender an explanation of his conduct in writing, without unnecessary delay.'

Those followers of Dr. Johnson who join in his admiration of a good hater, would have every reason to be satisfied

with Lord Wadehurst in this respect. In the two cases which most directly come into this history, he carried his hatred into the second generation. He hated old Sir Claude Gault because he had turned him out of Parliament when he was the Hon. Sidney Birkett, and the present baronet inherited this hatred even before he had earned some for himself by attempting a coarse practical joke on him. He hated his own brother for the cause already given, and visited his sins on Dick. Most people joined him in his estimate of Sir Claude Gault; but respecting his nephew he was in a minority of one. All sorts and conditions of men, women and children—especially children—loved Dick: Dick, with his handsome face, his open hand, and his winning, though somewhat masterful, ways.

Now, the house of Wadehurst was not remarkable for good looks. From the grim old law lord who founded it, down to its present heir-apparent, it was, in sporting parlance, 'a very ordinary lot'—to look at. All but Dick. He took after his beautiful mother, and was consequently a daily reminder of her bad conduct. What right had he to be the only good-looking one of the family? What right had he to march about with his head in the air as though the whole place belonged to him, with its rightful heir following him like a dog? My lord almost hated his own son for what he called his 'slavish adoration' of this reprobate cousin. Yet in his heart of hearts there sometimes came the whisper, 'If the fellow had been my son, how proud I could be of him!'

In other ways he was just, almost generous. When Dick was left an orphan on his hands, he put aside the provision which had been made for him, and educated him at his own expense, and on an equal footing with his own son. When Dick came of age—an event which took place six months before this story begins—every penny of the principal, with interest and compound interest, was paid over to him.

Nor was any hint given that he had now his own way to make in the world, or that Wadehurst would be less a home for him than of old. He felt, in a dim sort of way, that his uncle disliked him. But who was there that his uncle did not dislike? Cold and snappish and fault-finding with his own son, how could Dick expect better treatment? The boys grew up together

in unkindness. It became the normal atmosphere of their lives, and they breathed it as unconsciously as they breathed the air.

Wadehurst was a boys' paradise—lots of good fishing, shooting, cricketing, and, later on, hunting, for them ; and only the dinner-hour to pay for the fun. This was the one meal they were called upon to take in the company of their noble relative. It was conducted with much pomp and circumstance, and led them to regard their dress clothes as garments of mourning and humiliation.

Sometimes—*dies iræ !*—the butler would present his lordship's compliments to one (or perhaps both) of them, and beg him (or them) to step into the library, when most convenient, for a few minutes. Those would be very bad 'few minutes,' for my

lord had a sneering way of scolding, hateful alike to boy or man.

It was thus that he earned the name of 'Old Bogey,' shortened to 'Bogey' as the boys grew up.

Here I have to say that the heir of Wadehurst was afflicted with a peculiar ailment—whether of heart, or brain, or nerves, the faculty could not discover—which sent him occasionally into something perilously resembling fits. Physical exertion seemed to do him no harm. He could ride to hounds, row, score a good innings, and come home none the worse; but anything in the nature of a *moral* shock prostrated him. Such causes as seeing a dog run over, or being cursed by a poacher whom he had helped to catch, brought on these attacks. The cause was not fear or temper, but some mysterious

rush of emotion which he could not master, and this was one reason why his cousin Dick became 'masterful.'

Wishing to save 'dear old Frank' the possibility of contradiction or annoyance, he took charge of all that concerned them in stable or on stubble, and—as Lord Wadehurst scorned to take interest in such matters—became acting 'young master.'

Given any two boys, the one three years older than the other, brought up together and left to their own resources as these were, and the law of the survival of the fittest would prevail. Frank adored his cousin, and accepted his leadership as a matter of course. Perhaps he did not fully realize why he was told not to bother himself about this or that, and put the successful results down to the credit of 'dear old Dick.'

One of the attacks already mentioned cut short Frank's career at school just as Dick was leaving, and this led to the pair going to 'read' with the Rev. Mr. Barbour at Fairlock, for as the faculty decided that it was not advisable for Frank to go to a university, Dick declined to follow his uncle's academic career at Trinity.

Good Mr. Barbour had every reason to be satisfied with both his pupils, but his keen sense of expediency taught him that it would be prudent to praise only one of them.

When Dick came of age, he had—counting interest on accumulations during his minority—about six hundred a year of his own. At this period he was more than half-way to the Bar, having kept terms for two years and passed (easily) the preliminary examinations.

Mr. Barbour could not teach him law,

and therefore he began to read it with perhaps as enlightening a teacher—himself. If certain events to be recorded hereafter had not happened, the end of the year in which we first make his acquaintance might have found him installed in chambers in the Temple, and studying under the famous Mr. Poser.

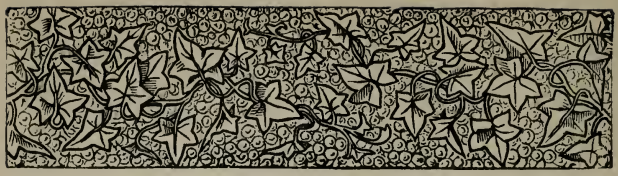
This arrangement suited Bogey, although he chafed at not being consulted about it.

'I think, uncle,' said Dick, in his offhand way, 'that I'll go to the Bar. Will you please let me have a cheque for the stamps and things? I think they come to about a hundred.'

Lord Wadehurst, having means of accurate information at hand, drew for the exact amount, and entered it in his guardianship account.

Then it was that he began to realize that this nephew was a man, that his son was fast becoming one also, and that the system he had pursued towards them both was a mistake. He, who ever since his 'Sucker' days at Cambridge had set himself up as a teacher of mankind and a former of society, had done nothing to teach or form his only son and heir! It appeared very odd as he thought this over, but it was true. When baby Frank lost his poor, unloved mother, Lord Wadehurst could not be troubled with infants. When boy Frank was getting into mischief, his father was too busy framing rules and regulations for Board Schools to attend to him. And now young man Frank was a stranger! The twig he might have bent so easily years ago, had grown into a sapling that might not easily lend itself to

the bending. Worse, the sapling had found a support, and had grown up against it and with it. Dick had to be taken into account. To bend Frank, Dick would have to be bent or broken.



CHAPTER III.

LIKE THE LETTING OUT OF WATERS.

THE day after the affray in Fairlock Churchyard, the butler approached Dick as he rose from luncheon with one of those fateful messages already mentioned.

'My lord's compliments, sir, and he will be glad to see you in the library at your earliest convenience.'

Dick knew what was coming, and dreaded it.

Having been received with a bow, and motioned to a chair, as though he were

the Bishop of the diocese on a visit of ceremony, my lord began :

'What is this I hear about a fight between you and Sir Claude Gault ?'

'There was no fight,' Dick replied ; 'I wish there had been.'

His lordship clasped the fingers of his hands in front of his breast, and casting up his eyes, remarked slowly, apparently to the ceiling :

'He wishes that he had been engaged in a brutal affray with a blackguard on consecrated ground, and on the Sabbath day !'

'Well, that's about as unfairly as you can put it,' Dick replied. 'I wasn't thinking of the when or the where. You asked me about a "fight," and there was none. The fellow came up from behind and struck me like a coward, without

warning. I wish that he had given me a *chance* to fight—that's what I mean.'

'Was he sober?'

'I suppose so. He hit straight enough.'

'May I venture to inquire why you went to church at Fairlock?'

'I often go there,' said Dick evasively.

'Attracted by the eloquence of the Rev. Mr. Barbour?'

'I don't think there is much to choose between his sermons and those we get here.'

'The difference appears to be worth a drive of ten miles. *Who is she?*'

Dick bit his lip, and made no reply.

'Well,' continued Lord Wadehurst, with an exasperating sneer, 'we shall probably know in time. 'What are you going to do?'

'About what?'

'He has been knocked down in presence of fifty people,' his uncle remarked again to the ceiling, 'and when asked what he purposes to do, inquires, "*what about*"!'

'What *can* I do?' asked Dick, warming up. 'I mustn't challenge him in this country—the law won't let me. All I can do is to wait till I get a chance, then give him as good a thrashing as he'll ever get in all his life.'

'And this is the young man who has so high a respect for the law!'

'I'm quite willing to hear your advice on the subject,' said Dick.

'Oh yes; always ready to *hear*. You *heard* me say some years ago that I did not wish you to associate with this man Gault, and yet I understand that you frequently visit at his house.'

'Since his marriage, and to see his wife —my old playmate.'

'Hum—m! Was Lady Gault present when this trifling disturbance took place?'

'She was. I may as well tell you all, as you are sure to be told a heap of lies. I had something particular to say to Fan—to Lady Gault privately—just four words —and I had hardly got them out, when he hit me.'

'Might one venture to inquire the nature of your private confidences with a married woman?'

'They have nothing to do with Sir Claude.'

'Indeed! In my time it would have been considered interesting to a married man to know what was whispered privately to his wife by a man of your age. Wasn't it rather clumsy of you to have

these confidences in the middle of a crowd of bumpkins ?'

'It seemed to me such a very harmless thing.'

'Sir Claude was not of your opinion. Now I think I understand. You will go to Colonel Daly at once and take out a summons for assault against Sir Claude Gault.'

'Make a law case of it ?' cried Dick aghast.

'Yes, sir. The dog-whip of the criminal law is the only weapon you can use against that man. He shall be lashed with shame before the whole country.'

Never yet had Dick seen his lordship so excited. He rose from his chair and paced the room, muttering. Dick remembered what he had heard from the Barbours, and his heart sank.

'You had really better let me manage this my own way,' he said, in a more conciliatory tone than he had yet assumed.

'*Your* way!' Lord Wadehurst sneered; 'you have no way of your own. I insist on having mine.'

'If you reflect for a moment,' Dick pleaded, 'you will see that Lady Gault——'

'Bah! Suppose for a moment that I give you your own way, and you make a vulgar fight of it as you propose, do you think you can keep her name out of it then—when you are in the wrong? No; my orders to you are that you take criminal proceedings against this ruffian. It would not be decent for me to issue the summons in my own case, for it *is* my case. *I* feel the insult, if you don't. I will not have it known that there is a

coward in my family. Go to Colonel Daly at once—do you hear ?'

'I have heard you use a word which you will be good enough to retract,' replied Dick, white with anger.

'Obey my orders, sir! Not another word.'

'All right,' said Dick; and he made towards the door.

Lord Wadehurst resumed his seat with something as nearly resembling a smile as his thin lips could assume.

'Tell the Colonel from me to notify the other magistrates, so that we shall have a full bench on Saturday,' he said.

'I am not going to Colonel Daly, my lord,' Dick replied.

'Then you were sneaking away out of my presence under a false pretence.'

'Oh no. I answered "All right" to

your concluding order — "Not another word." And there shall not be another word about it till you have withdrawn two things which you have just said.'

'How dare you take this tone to me, sir!'

'There is no coward in your family, Lord Wadehurst,' said Dick; 'and the only sneaking I am aware of is on the part of one who wants to vent a personal grudge at the expense of an innocent woman.'

His lordship fell back in his chair as though Sir Claude had given him also a right-hander straight from the shoulder.

'I will not go to law,' continued Dick. 'If anyone else had assaulted me, you would have made out that I was in the wrong, and that it served me right. But Sir Claude is your political rival in this

county, as his father was before him; and now you want to use me as a cat's-paw to discredit him. No; I loathe the man for more things than the blow he gave me, and I'll get even with him for *that* in my own way.'

'I will not endure anyone under this roof,' Lord Wadehurst said, after a long pause, during which he pulled himself together, 'who sets my wishes at defiance. I am master here, and will be obeyed. I am a magistrate, and refuse to condone a crime. I am the head of my family, but any of its members who think they can act for themselves are at liberty to do so—at a distance. I give you' (consulting his watch) 'two hours to assume a demeanour better fitted to your duty, your position, and your prospects.'

* * * * *

'*Like the letting out of waters!*' Anger surged in two breasts, loosened the facings of the dam which had restrained it those many years, and forth burst the flood.

'How could I have endured the insolent puppy so long?' muttered the uncle, left alone.

'I am a cur not to have broken with the old brute long ago!' raged the nephew, as he rushed up to his room.

The two hours passed very slowly in the library.

'Half an hour would have been quite long enough,' Lord Wadehurst thought; 'and his infernal pride will keep him out till the last moment.'

He tried to read, he tried to write, he tried to think about something else; but all in vain. The selection of cutting phrases for his speech on the expected capitulation

broke into any other occupation, and dispersed it in confusion.

When about half the time had elapsed, a happy thought struck him. He would send for the butler and pump him—*interrogate* was the word in his lordship's mind, but it came to the same thing.

The butler, like all the other servants, was fond of Dick, and did his best to know as little as possible, but in an evil moment spoke of him as his 'young master,' a phrase which nearly cost him his place. After this the pump sucked, and much of the village scandal about Dick and Lady Gault came out. A grim smile parted my lord's thin lips when he was once more alone.

Dick's last words came back to his memory with precision: '*I loathe the man for more things than the blow he gave me,*

and I'll get even with him for that in my own way.'

'If half the gossips said were true, there might be,' he thought, 'more than an exposure at petty sessions and a five-pound fine in store for Sir Claude Gault. *His own way:* perhaps it might be as good a one as any. The woman is wretched, and might be fool enough to let him have it. That *would* be blow for blow. A suit for divorce—pleas, cruelty and connivance, a grand disclosure in full publicity of the petitioner's brutality, his drunken riots, his profligacy! And such a feast of revenge might be postponed "without day" for a squabble at petty sessions, that would not even get into the papers! The fellow is right,' Lord Wadehurst summed up. 'When he has apologized, I will let him have his "own way."'

By this time the stable clock had chimed five. The two hours were over, and the apology not yet begun.

Six o'clock, and no sign of it.

The butler was summoned again.

'Tell Mr. Richard that I desire to see him immediately'—in his own mind he added, 'for sentence.'

'I beg your pardon, my lord,' stammered the trembling servitor, 'but Mr. Richard is not in the house.'

'Find him, then, and deliver my message.'

'I—I—think—my lord, that he has gone to London.'

'You *know*' (sternly) 'that he is gone to London?'

'Yes, my lord.'

'Did he take much luggage with him?'

'No, my lord—only a hand-bag; but

he left a message for Mr. Birkett to have enough things for a week packed up and sent on to-morrow.'

'You may go,' said Lord Wadehurst.

CHAPTER IV.

FATHER AND SON.

THROW a cup of water into a red-hot pot, and you know exactly what to expect. The water will fly off in steam, and the pot will cool down. When cold bad temper falls on hot bad temper, there is indeed an explosion, but no evaporation or loss of caloric follows.

'The fool,' mused Lord Wadehurst, 'thinks to gain a point by running away. It only saves me the trouble of turning him out. "Young master" indeed!'

Then he wrote this order :

'Mr. Richard Birkett's personal effects —clothes, books, guns, tackle, everything that he has been in the habit of using exclusively—are to be packed up carefully, and forwarded to the address given in respect of the portmanteau to be sent by Mr. Birkett to-morrow.

'Mr. Birkett is on no account to be informed of this order, or allowed to witness any part of its execution, until I have communicated with him myself.

'WADEHURST.'

This done, he began to rehearse in his own mind the manner in which this communication should be made, not knowing yet how difficult the task would be. You have learned already that he scorned the boy for his subserviency to Dick. He never loved him, or the wife who bore

him. All the affection of which his heart was capable had gone out to the beautiful woman who had thrown him over for his soldier brother. He resented poor Frank's physical infirmity as an insult to a hard and sturdy race, and would not allow that there was anything serious about his attacks. 'Indigestion!' he would sneer; 'the boy has been over-eating.'

Still, the boy was his only child—his heir. If he died, the title—possible eventuality!—would go to Dick. He would have to be careful in case it should be true that any mental shock was bad for Frank. It would take a hard wrench to tear these two apart. As he thought it over, his conscience began to prick him. 'What sort of a father have you been,' it asked him, 'to this boy? How do you propose to make up to him for the com-

panion, the friend, the almost brother, you expel ?'

He found some consolation in blaming Dick.

'Ungrateful hound !' he muttered. '*He* to pretend to love my son, when he leaves him for a freak of pride !' This was the line to take. 'Here,' he would say to Frank, 'is a man who has insulted your father, and shows his indifference to you by running away; we shall see more of each other for the future, and get on very well without him.'

He sat down to his solemn dinner of two without taking any notice of the vacant place to his left.

Frank, who was in unusually good spirits, made the first allusion to his cousin's absence.

'Dick has gone to town,' he said.

'So I understand,' replied his father dryly. 'Rather a sudden—freak.'

'Oh no. He had arranged to go to-morrow. That was all settled last week. Something or other hurried him. I was out when the post came in, and when he left, so I cannot tell you what it was.'

Lord Wadehurst was glad he could not.

'I am going up myself,' he said after a pause, during which the soup was removed with funereal solemnity, 'on Wednesday, for Miss Heath's wedding. I presume you will accompany me?'

Now, this Miss Heath who was to be married on Wednesday was the dear sister of Lady Gault, and destined to score the second catch matrimonial in her family. For many years they had occupied their country house at Wadehurst out of 'the

season'; but hard times and his London engagements had recently compelled Mr. Heath to rent it to that same Colonel Daly who was to have issued the summons against Sir Claude. Thus it was that Dick had spoken of Lady Gault as his old playfellow, and that Lord Wadehurst presumed that Frank would accompany him to her sister's wedding.

Frank blushed, looked intently at his plate, and weakly informed the cutlet thereon that he 'thought not.'

'Why not?' asked his father sharply.

'I am not expected.'

'That is very strange! I received my invitation nearly a month ago.'

'Well, they could hardly ask me without Dick.'

'If you put it the other way, I could understand you. I hope you have not

allowed yourself to be mixed up with your cousin's misconduct at Fairlock ?'

'Misconduct !' Frank warmly expostulated. 'Oh, father ! that's unfair ! He wasn't a bit to blame. He was taken at a cowardly disadvantage.'

'Sir Claude had strong provocation.'

'No provocation can justify a fellow hitting another from behind his back,' said Frank stoutly.

As a rule, my Lord Wadehurst resented contradiction. He frowned, and a rebuke was in course of fulmination, but no flash came out of the thunder-cloud, and the cloud itself cleared away as he looked into his son's brightened eyes and flushed face. 'The boy has spirit,' he thought. 'When we are friends, he will stand up like that for me.'

'We will not argue the question,'

he said aloud; 'it is not a pleasant one.'

'Let me tell you something which may please you,' said Frank, when the servants had retired. 'I very nearly had one of my attacks to-day.'

'You call that something pleasant?'

'Yes, because I got over it. Old Bates came running up with his mouth open and blurted out, "He's gone! Mr. Dick's gone!" and of course it gave me a turn. I thought he was dead; but I pulled myself together and fought it off. I don't remember ever to have gone so far, and then got back all right. Don't you think it is a good sign, and that I am growing out of them?'

No one could have resisted the happy, eager look with which these words were spoken. Lord Wadehurst stretched out

his hand, grasped that of his son, and whispered huskily under his breath :

'God grant it, my boy! God grant it!'

'I shall write to Dick to-night, and tell him,' Frank continued. 'He'll be awfully glad.'

This was an unfortunate speech. It reminded my lord of the impending wrench, and showed how hard it would be.

Contrary to his custom, Lord Wadehurst took his after-dinner wine in the dining-room, and conversed pleasantly about things in general. When they parted, instead of the usual dry 'Good-night,' thrown over a shoulder, there came a hand-clasp and a 'God bless you, my boy!'

* * * * *

Recounting these wonders to Dick, Frank wrote:

'Bogey was supernaturally civil at dinner. I expected war over your going away without taking leave. He didn't say a word about Fan, but got perilously near her. Wanted to know why we were not going to Bertha Heath's wedding. At dessert he became absolutely *human*—proposed himself that I should ask the Churchills down for Christmas; told me I would be of age next year, and must prepare myself to take my proper place in the world as his heir; and shook hands when he left. What does this portend? Some fearful convulsion of nature is at hand. I am prepared for his wanting to marry again, or joining the Salvation Army.

'I had your things packed and sent. Don't forgot to call at Stubbs' for my pipe;' and so on and so on.

This finished and sent to the bag, he stretched himself out on the sofa, took up a novel, and went to sleep over it. It was not one of mine.

He woke up with the feeling that someone was in the room, and found his father standing by his side. This apparition gave him a severe shock. He sprang up, speechless and livid, rocking himself to and fro with his head clasped in his hands.

'My God!' cried the father aghast, 'what have I done? Frank, my poor boy, speak to me! Is there nothing you take—no medicine—no——'

'Yes' (faintly), 'in Dick's smoking-box, there, behind the screen.'

Lord Wadehurst darted to the indicated spot, but found nothing.

'Oh yes,' Frank persisted, 'he always keeps some there, in case. It's a big oak box with silver hinges—you can't miss it.'

Alas! the smoking-box was one of the things that belonged exclusively to banished Dick, and it was already packed up.

'Never mind,' said Frank, with a stronger and steadier voice; 'I've fought it down again. Perhaps a glass of brandy will do as well now.'

The brandy was soon procured, and held to his lips by hands as cold as his own.

'Ah!' (with a long-drawn sigh) 'that has done it. The machinery is all at work again. Are you not glad, father? This is the second time I've knocked it out.'

Lord Wadehurst turned aside and hid his face—he could not answer. When he could trust himself to speak, he sat down beside Frank, and gave him another surprise by throwing his arms around him.

'Glad!' he said. 'I will let you know how glad hereafter. Do you feel well now?'

'Oh, I'm all right—just a little shaky, though. But please don't talk about it. Dick never does. He always finds something to put it out of my mind. Can't we'—with a smile at the new-born possibility of his father becoming pleasant—'do something?'

'I challenge you to a game of bezique,' replied his lordship with alacrity. 'I see a box of markers on the table. Don't move; I'll bring it.'

Would wonders ever end?

'Do you play the "royal" game?' Frank asked.

'No; that is a modern invention—for me. I only know the old game.'

'Dick likes that best because it's easiest. I can beat his head off at the royal.'

Lord Wadehurst winced at these repeated mentions of Dick. He had joined his son that night for the express purpose of breaking the news—the *bad* news as he knew it must be—of Dick's disgrace, and found at every step how hard the task would be. As they played and chatted, the light in which he had begun to see this son of his as a companion broadened. The young fellow talked well and pluckily, his only indiscretion being appeals to Dick—as though to Cæsar—when any statement was questioned. This did Dick's case no good. It became quite

clear to my lord that he could not hope to gain the place he desired in his son's heart in the presence of so strong a competition. He almost blamed himself for allowing the enemy to obtain so firm a hold. Why not, he thought, as he retired to rest, give up abusing his former colleagues, and trying to worry himself back into office, and, as a better post, train up this bright young fellow for a Parliamentary career, and guide him, in the light of his own failures, to success ?

Frank also went to bed full of thoughts. He wished he had not written as he had done to Dick.

'Poor old governor!' he mused. 'I called him "Bogey," and said he was becoming *almost human*, and it isn't fair.'

Next morning came a message from his lordship desiring to know how Mr. Birkett

had passed the night. Frank tore a page out of his note-book and wrote :

'So kind of you to ask! All right

'Your loving son,

'FRANK.'

Another and longer letter was then begun to Dick, describing in glowing colours the great transformation scene of the night before. He had got to the point where his father failed to find the smoking-box, and then laid down his pen.

'He must have been awfully upset not to find it,' he thought, 'when——'

Here he drew aside the screen. No smoking-box was there! He rang the bell, and, as bad luck would have it, not his own man, but the butler, answered it.

'Where's Mr. Dick's smoking-box ?'

He saw in a moment from the man's

face and manner that something was wrong.

'Perhaps he took it up to his room when he left,' said Frank. 'I'll go and see.'

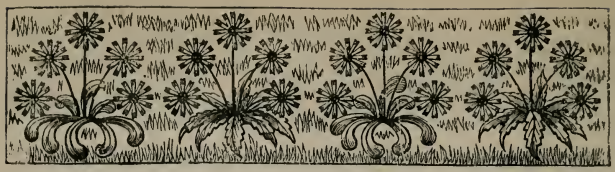
Then, for the first time in his life, this butler rushed into his noble master's presence without summons or warning.

'My lord!' he stammered, 'Mr. Birkett has gone to Mr. Richard's room, and——'

'Well? and what?'

'Oh, my lord! he will see——'

Lord Wadehurst turned faint with a sense of the coming danger. He staggered rather than ran up the stairs, and just arrived in time to see his now loved son give a dazed look round the dismantled room, clasp his head in the old pitiful way, and fall in convulsions, terrible to witness, on the floor.



CHAPTER V.

A 'SMART' WEDDING.

THE young lady who was to be married on Wednesday came of very 'smart' people in every sense of the word. Her father was heir-presumptive to the Scotch earldom of Strathfolia; her mother was first cousin to a duke. Her sister had made what was supposed to be *the* match of the season when she became Lady Gault. They lived in good style, but the girls were given distinctly to understand that they must look out for themselves and marry rich men, because all the money was

required to gild the prospective coronet. And they had a mother with a keen scent for desirable *partis*, and a short way with detrimentals, to help them. Still, the course of true love had not run smoothly with the gentleman who was to be married on Wednesday. Twice had he been refused, and within a week of the day fixed for her wedding the bride-elect had thrown herself into the maternal arms and declared in a paroxysm of sobs that she *could* not go through with it.

Mrs. Heath was too wise a woman to argue. She told the weeping girl that she *had* to go through with it, and was very angry with her second-born, to whose influence she attributed this insubordination. And she was right. From the very first Lady Gault's cry had been, 'For God's sake, Bertha dear, don't marry

a man you cannot love! *Look at me!*'

Now, Mr. Macgruther was not by any means a Claude Gault. He was utterly incapable of abusing a woman, but there was nothing in his manner to foreshadow a capacity for caressing one. His respectability was iron-clad, his wealth considerable. He had already made his mark in the House, and was 'in the running' for Cabinet rank. Moreover, he was not yet fifty, well preserved for his age, and without incumbrances. But the bride was twenty-two, and had illusions.

She was a blonde of what I will venture to call the *flamboyant* type — premising that flames are not red, as you may see for yourself if you notice them carefully. Tall, plump as a partridge, and lithe as a snake, with hair glowing like ripe barley in the

sun-set; eyes of deepest violet, and cheeks of sea-shell pink—her beauty seemed to blaze in any company. Blazed and burned; only, unfortunately, the fuel it consumed was, till recently, composed of the social trash which match-making mothers used to call 'detrimentals.'

It was, perhaps, on this account that clever Mrs. Heath precipitated her second daughter's marriage. In all due course Bertha should have been disposed of first, being the elder, and in her fourth season; but Sir Claude did not want Bertha. He was afraid of her, for she had a sharp tongue, and his manners laid him open to many a thrust. He preferred timid little Fanny, and Mrs. Heath, fearful lest she might catch her sister's fancy for the trash above mentioned, or that he might cool, 'ran them in' to matrimony. They were

engaged early in May and married on the 4th of June. It is the pace that kills.

Poor Fanny was not given breathing-time, or she might have discovered that the man who thought he loved her was an illiterate rowdy, a haunter of music-halls and drinking-bars, without a taste except for football and other sports of violence, in which his physical strength made him proficient.

Wise too late, and knowing that Bertha did not care a snap of her fingers for Mr. Macgruther, some sharp passages had passed between Mrs. Heath and her second daughter on the subject of this marriage; but Lady Gault gave in, as usual, and latterly seemed to be reconciled to it. So when the family division were mustered for church, there was some surprise at the non-appearance of the bride's

sister, tempered, however, with satisfaction at the absence of her brother-in-law. An A B C was consulted, and disclosed the fact that a train would be in at 3.5. So they waited. The ceremony was to be by special license, and so half an hour or more did not matter.

They waited, but no Lady Gault. Perhaps she had made a mistake and gone to the church, and in this hope they started. She was not in the church, but there her mother learned that the Gaults—husband and wife—had left Wadehurst for London early that morning.

Her informant was that Colonel Daly of whom we have heard. The Colonel was one of those persons who always 'happen to know,' or 'happen to see,' or 'happen to hear,' something which upsets things. He said that as he took his seat in

the train he happened to look out of the window, and happened to see the Gaults' carriage coming up the road at a gallop, and as the station-master happened to be passing, he (the Colonel) exclaimed :

'Bless my soul! That's Sir Claude and Lady Gault coming, and they'll miss the train. Pray, my good man, detain it, as I happen to know they are going to her sister's wedding.'

So the train was stopped for them. The Colonel supposed that they got into a carriage for Charing Cross instead of one for Victoria, and he did not happen to see them on arrival.

'She comes up to town on the very day of her sister's wedding and does not attend it!' thought Mrs. Heath with some bitterness, for she lived in fear of Mrs. Grundy,

and that lady would certainly have something to say in the premises.

The wedding was like any other 'smart' function of its order. There were bridesmaids with moonstone and diamond lockets, the gift of the bridegroom, and pages in mediæval costumes, and a bishop, and all the rest of it; with presents galore exhibited in the library at home. The bride, who did not look her best in white, went through it bravely enough, but fainted in the vestry before she had signed her name. This, her mother informed all and singular, was owing to a shock given her by that foolish old man, Colonel Daly, who 'happened' to think it a good time and place to tell her that an old playmate—Frank Birkett, poor boy! — had been stricken with paralysis, and was not expected to recover.

Of the bridegroom it may be said that he looked quite handsome for a man of his years, and conducted himself throughout with the dignity of a duke. He took his wife away on an extended tour to the Continent, and you will not hear of them again for some time to come.

So all was well over, the only thorn in the cushion being the unsisterly part played by Fanny Gault. Not a line from her, not a message, not a present, and this neglect accentuated by her presence in town!

'We have only old Daly's word for it, my love,' pleaded the father in extenuation; 'and you know he is as blind as a bat. They might have missed the train, after all; or he' (meaning Sir Claude) 'might have gone somewhere and—well, got drunk. There is no use mincing matters.'

'She could have come here without him,' persisted Mrs. Heath. 'Anyhow, she might have sent word.'

Further discussion was cut short by a servant, who announced that Corporal Byngton (a one-armed pensioner who kept the gardens opposite) wished particularly to see Mr. Heath.

'The usual thing—wants to drink our health,' he surmised, and felt in his pocket.

But he was wrong. It was an unusual thing. The corporal had picked up a gold bracelet early that morning in the middle of the grand walk, close to the gate of the gardens, and thought it might belong to Miss Bertha.

He was quite right: it did. It was a Christmas gift from her brothers, and had her and their initials engraved on the inside.

But how came she to have dropped it in the gardens? She had not been out of the house all that day till she left it with her husband. If it had been lost the day before *in the light*, someone must have found it before the corporal went on duty. If he had been asked, he would have said that he passed the spot that night at ten o'clock, and there was no bracelet there. But he was asked no questions, and, being a discreet old soldier, did not volunteer any explanations. He put his half-sovereign in his pocket, and left with what he thought locked up in his mind.

'Well?' asked the father, when once more alone with his wife, 'what do you make of this?'

'She must have been in the gardens late last night.'

'Did anyone see her go out?'

'Not that I am aware of, and' (with emphasis), 'my dear, it would not be wise to ask.'

'No, it would not.'

'I made her go to bed early—about nine o'clock—as she was tired with all her packing up,' Mrs. Heath continued, 'and did not see her again till this morning. One of the servants might have stolen or borrowed the bracelet for show to some follower, and lost it. I can find out if any of the women were absent, without giving any reason for the inquiry.'

This she did with much diplomacy, and came upon a startling fact. None of the women servants had been *out* that night, but the bride's own maid (who had gone on the honeymoon with her) had been seen to open the front door and let someone *in* at about a quarter to twelve o'clock.

'It was quite providential,' Mrs. Heath summed up, in reporting this disclosure to her lord, 'that Byngton did not blurt out something before the marriage. Good heavens! what would Macgruther have thought? The little *idiot!* She evidently went out to wish one of her old lovers good-bye.'

'Poor girl!' said the father, with something very like a sob.

There were several 'old lovers' much younger in years than Mr. Macgruther, to any of whom the impulsive and romantic girl who now bore his name might have been tempted to say a last good-bye, in defiance of the proprieties. In her first season she became a prey to the detrimentals. Sad-eyed, handsome creatures, worthy to pose as heroes for Ouida, with thousands and thousands (of debts), flocked

to her side, and moved her susceptible heart to dreams of love unquenchable. She had several serious 'affairs' before the eligible Macgruther appeared—regular tempests of the heart, each, as she gave out at the time, to calm only in a convent or the grave. The excitement suited her temperament and tickled her love of admiration. So she played Lucy of Lammermoor to a line of Edgar Ravenswoods, who did not stable their steeds in the Kelpie's Flow, but left footprints on stabler sands of time. Edgar I. had to exchange into the Egyptian army, and go to Egypt under circumstances outside of her sphere of influence. Edgar II. was very sorry, but he had forgotten the family arrangement under which he was to marry his cousin Sarah. Edgar III. gave his broken heart to the

heiress of a Chicago man, who had made a 'pile' in hogs, and absorbed some of the qualities of those useful animals. Edgar IV. was a rascal who had a wife and four children in the Isle of Man. The other Edgar, for whose sake she *could* not go through with Macgruther, must be marked *x*, not in its form as a numeral, but as applied by mathematicians to any unknown quantity.

Poor Mr. Macgruther had much to put up with, but he set his hard head upon making this showy, flower-like girl his wife, and with Mrs. Heath's judicious aid succeeded. Strong in his purpose, and with the confidence in himself and his methods which had gained him every other success in life, he scorned the 'detrimentals' he had supplanted, and elected himself to be a husband who would

become loved and honoured beyond the common mark. But, infatuated as he was, his keen sense of honour would have caused him much trouble, if he had known what passed in those dark gardens on the last night of his bride's maiden life.

'Poor girl!' echoed Mrs. Heath. 'Nonsense! I think she is a very lucky girl, and I'm sure Mr. Macgruther will make her a happy woman.'

Cautious Mrs. Heath had not said anything to her lord about that scene we know of, and was thankful for the dispensation of Providence which sends girls to what they deem the softer parent in such straits. If poor, love-lorn Bertha had thrown herself into her father's arms and declared that she could not go through with it, there might have been trouble.

As it was, John Heath became anxious

and distressed. Here, he feared, was another loveless marriage, with danger ahead. *Someone* had gained sufficient influence over his daughter to compel a clandestine meeting within a few hours of her marriage. Who could that someone be ?'

'Have you any suspicion ?' he asked his wife.

'What does it matter now ?' she replied evasively. 'The subject is not a pleasant one, and really, John, I wonder at your harping on it so.'

But he returned to the charge.

'You said something once about young Birkett.'

'Dick ? Oh, he put himself too forward, and Macgruther disliked him—that's all. So I had to give him a hint. Dick flirts with every pretty woman he sees.

You couldn't have made a worse guess. Why, he's playing the fool now with her married sister, and got himself knocked down for his pains.'

'Lord Charles Carlson ?'

'She never cared a snap of her fingers for him. Besides, he is a gentleman, and would never have compromised a woman like that.'

'Count Deciani ?'

'Possibly. There is an Italian air about it. But really you are doing the child an injustice. I only said she *might* have gone out to wish some old lover good-bye. And I said that hastily. Now you are going through a catalogue of her admirers as though it *must* be so. How do we know that she went out at all ?'

'I understood you to say that Pritchard let someone in.'

'Well? no one says that it was Bertha.'

John Heath gave a sigh of relief.

'I should hope not,' he said.

Later on a discovery was made which put quite another complexion on the case. The under-housemaid had a young man engaged as a grocer's assistant, who employed his spare time (and some cash which his master could not spare) in betting upon race-horses. Watched by the police, it was found that he frequently met his sweetheart in the gardens after dark; and when the case was sufficiently clear, and her boxes were searched, many things which did not belong to her were found, and (upon further inquiry) several silver spoons and forks which ought to have been in the pantry were missed. She had made free with Miss Bertha's (to be)

discarded gowns, and given the plate to her lover to pawn.

So here it was. Pritchard—privy to the love-making, but innocent of its consequences—had let *her* in.

'So you see,' said Mrs. Heath triumphantly, 'how foolish we have been. As to that other matter about which you seemed to be anxious, you may dismiss it from your mind. The girl never really cared for anyone; and now, from what she writes, she is quite contented.'

CHAPTER VI.

D—I—C—K.

'THERE is something or somebody he wants,' said the great London doctor, turning from the bed where Frank Birkett lay; 'and he is painfully excited about it. Find out what it is.'

Easily said, but how to be done with a man who cannot speak or write, or move a limb, but whose sad eyes turn from face to face imploringly? The situation is a difficult one. It beats the M.D., and he gives it up; but the nurse (being a woman) worries at it till she finds a clue.

'If you can hear what I say, shut your eyes,' she tells her patient.

His eyes brightened as though he understood, and then closed.

'That will mean *yes*,' she says. 'Now if what you want is in this room, look towards it.'

The eyes, with a ghost of a smile in them, turn towards a small table whereon are some books and a box.

She touches the books one by one, and there is no sign. She touches the box.

That is what he wants.

What is in the box? Ivory letters for playing the old game of Logomachy!

'Ha, ha!' chuckles the nurse; 'we are getting on. Now then.'

She puts the letters in alphabetical order and lays them one by one, face upwards, on the bed.

A —no sign. B and C also pass. Before the next ivory can be turned the now sparkling eyes are closed. It is D.

Back again to A, and stop at I.

Back again, and C has it.

Back again, and it spells DICK.

Lord Wadehurst, who has watched the experiment anxiously, turns aside with a sob. The struggle is short but sharp. The imploring look is again in his son's face. It *must* be obeyed. He goes down to his library and writes this message :

'RICHARD BIRKETT, ESQ.,
'87, Ashford Street,
'London.

'Your cousin is very ill. He wishes to see you. Come back for his sake.

'WADEHURST.'

The day drags on, and there is no reply. Poor stricken Frank knows that the mes-

sage has been sent, and becomes more and more fretful and feverish. The apparent neglect fills Lord Wadehurst with bitterness, but there is a spice of comfort in it. Frank will get well, of course—in time. He will know that this beloved Dick carried his resentment against his father so far as to ignore him in his pain. That will loosen the tie.

Nevertheless he tried again, thus :

'*Second Message.*—Frank dangerously ill. Begs you to come at once. You will be most welcome.'

The night comes on, and yet no answer.

'It is no use,' says his lordship; 'he has no heart. He will not come.'

No one dares to contradict him ; but the trained nurse, who knows what fever

means in such a case, takes matters quietly into her own hands, and sends this message :

'THE LANDLORD,
'87, Ashford Street,
'London.

'Is Mr. Birkett with you? Has he received any telegrams from Lord Wadehurst ?'

This scores within the hour :

'Mr. Birkett not arrived yet, but expected, as a large quantity of luggage was delivered this afternoon. Two telegrams waiting.'

When this is communicated to Frank a look of surprise, mingled with fear, comes over his face. But he seems more contented, and the fever abates.

Lord Wadehurst can account for the 'large quantity of luggage,' but the non-arrival of its owner at his own rooms, where he expected the small quantity to be sent on by Frank, was puzzling. Well, he would know all in the morning.

But he did not. No word from Dick; no further report from his landlord.

Lord Wadehurst sent for the butler.

'You told me yesterday that Mr. Richard had gone to London.'

'I thought so, my lord. I——'

'How did Mr. Richard leave the house?'

'In the dog-cart, my lord.'

'Alone?'

'Yes, my lord.'

'Who brought the dog-cart back?'

'A stableman, my lord.'

'*A* stableman! What stableman? From what stables—whose?'

'My lord, it was young Clark, of the Crown at Fairlock.'

'Why did you not say so at once? And how dared you tell me Mr. Richard had gone to London when you knew——'

Here his lordship pulled up, and repeated his first question without comment.

'If your lordship will please let me explain. Mr. Richard ordered the dog-cart in a hurry, as though he watned to catch the 5.40 train, and he left a message for Mr. Birkett to send his portmanteau on to London. So of course I thought he had gone to London, and told your lordship so.'

'But yesterday morning you knew this was not so. Why did you keep this secret? Why did you not tell me at once what Clark had said?'

'My lord, excuse me, but we all thought——'

'*Thought!* You are not paid to think; you are paid to do your duty and obey my orders. You have general instructions to report to me after luncheon all that has taken place during the past twenty-four hours. Why did you not report Clark's return with the dog-cart?'

'I should have done so, my lord, but for Mr. Birkett's seizure. Your lordship was so overwhelmed, so——'

'I understand.' His severe magisterial air dropped from him like a cloak, and he turned aside to hide his emotion. 'But you were wrong, though your motive was not unkind. Orders should be obeyed implicitly. See the consequences! I have been kept in the dark—misled. You let me telegraph to London.'

'My lord, I felt sure that Mr. Richard had gone there, after all.'

'Did you speak to Clark?'

'I did, my lord.'

'Well, what did he say?'

'My lord, he only——'

'Trash! The thing has been the talk of the housekeeper's room and the servants' hall for twenty-four hours. You have questioned and cross-questioned this person Grant—or whatever be his name—from Fairlock, and you know where Mr. Richard went, and what he did. I insist upon a full and true statement.'

It is a fact that most of his lordship's domestics had had a turn with the pump upon young Clark, and that what they got out of him had been discussed for all that it was worth, and would probably be under discussion for some time to come. But a

full and true statement of it may be contained in a few words.

Mr. Dick had driven over to Fairlock; had put up at the Crown, as usual; had sauntered forth, as usual; and if he had returned in about an hour, as usual, and driven back again, nothing unusual would have happened.

But he did not return.

His horse and trap remained there all night, and were sent home in the morning. This was all young Clark knew. What he had been asked, and did not know, would fill several pages. And now he had left!

Lord Wadehurst ordered his carriage, drove to Fairlock, and drew the Crown *blank*. Old Clark knew no more than young Clark had told, and young Clark had no more to tell.

The Rev. Mr. Barbour had not seen Dick since 'that disgraceful affair of Sunday,' but placed himself entirely at his lordship's orders as an investigator. So the peer waited at the Vicarage, and the parson went out in the not entirely new character of a private detective. He ascertained that several people had seen Dick walking through the village on Monday evening, and walking slowly, as though he had nothing particular to do. But he was going in the direction of the Manor House. As Lord Wadehurst could not possibly call there for any purpose, Mr. Barbour took his carriage, and found that Sir Claude and Lady Gault had gone to town on Tuesday morning, and had not yet returned. Asked if Mr. Richard Birkett had called on Monday evening, the butler wrestled with a broad grin, and

having defeated it, replied, 'No, sir,' with gravity and apparent truthfulness.

It was still worth while to ask again at the lodge, which was kept by the head-gardener's wife. She also had seen nothing of Dick since Sunday; 'And, oh! Mr. Barbour, do say,' she asked, 'how is his poor head?'

'I am surprised, Mrs. Pell,' he replied, 'that you take any interest in a young man who has behaved so shamefully. It does not become your position, Mrs. Pell. If Sir Claude——'

'Oh, please don't tell, Mr. Barbour. It —it slipped out like. I've known Mr. Dick so long. No, sir, he wasn't here on Monday. He hasn't called since——'

Here came an unlooked-for interruption. Half a dozen children of various ages had gathered round, as they will do in the

country when a 'gentleman' is talking to mother, and a big boy, proud of the knowledge he possessed, blurted out:

Why, mother! I seen him in the gardens Monday night myself.'

'Are you sure?' This from Mr. Barbour.

'Yes, sir; but he didn't want to see me, for he ran into the shrubbery.'

Told by his mother that he could not have seen Mr. Dick in the gardens, when she had not seen him pass the gate, he blubbered, but stuck to his story. It *was* Mr. Dick, and no one else, and he was hiding. Asked if he had seen anyone else, he said:

'Yes; Mr. Spaulding was there' (Mr. Spaulding, the reader will remember, is Sir Claude's stud-groom), 'and he, too, seemed to be hiding.'

'In fact,' summed up the Rector pleasantly, 'it was a game of hide-and-seek between you three.'

'No it weren't, neither,' said the boy. 'When you plays hide-and-seek, you——'

'There! there! there! That'll do. You are a very rude little boy, and much too forward. What business had you in the gardens after dark? Stealing apples, I dare say. Don't dare to answer me, sir. It was very careless of you, Mrs. Pell, to let anyone pass the gate after dark without taking notice.'

'Mr. Dick did *not* pass the gate, sir.'

'Tut! tut! How else could he get to the shrubbery?'

'I don't believe he *was* in the shrubbery.'

'Not when your own son says so?'

'It was dark. If my Bill saw him, Mr.

Spaulding must have seen him as well, and would have told. Then I should have been asked questions, and *I wasn't.* Bill is too forward, as you rightly say, Mr. Barbour, and he has made a mistake. Why, it stands to reason: why should Mr. Dick come prowling about the gardens at night like a thief?'

'My good Mrs. Pell,' replied the Rector, 'let me advise you to show less partisanship in matters concerning Mr. Dick. We will say no more about it now, and keep that boy's tongue quiet until—he is spoken to again. Good-day, Mrs. Pell.'

Mr. Barbour returned to the Vicarage with this 'painful' disclosure, in which he took great pride, and naturally branched out into the 'talk of the whole village' about Dick and Lady Gault. It was most distressing, he declared, but he kept on at

it as though it was pleasant ; and no interruptions came.

'Did you see Spaulding ?' Lord Wadehurst asked.

'No. I did not like to press the matter further until I had consulted you.'

'Right.'

'But now, if——'

'I have been away from my poor boy too long already,' interrupted his lordship. 'See me in the morning, Barbour. I will send a carriage for you. Do nothing more at present.'

He called at the station on his way home, and under cover of inquiry about the expedition of Mr. Richard's luggage, pumped the station-master about Mr. Richard himself. Mr. Richard had not been seen there for more than a week. During this discussion the train from

London arrived, and with it Colonel Daly, full of the wedding at which he had 'assisted.'

'Very smart affair, Lord Wadehurst,' he fussed. '*The* affair of the season, I should say. Everybody there. So sad about poor Frank! Hope he's getting on nicely. Yes, yes—only a question of time. Youth and the splendid constitution he inherits from you will pull him through. Dear boy! how he would have enjoyed the wedding of his old playmate! Charming bride—charming!'

'The Gaults were there, of course?' Lord Wadehurst inquired.

'Well, no. Curious, wasn't it? I happened to see them driving up to the station just as the train was starting, and I——'

We know the rest of the story, which had been told to twenty people already.

'Did you *see* Sir Claude?'

'Oh yes. Ha! ha! I think I know what you are after. Ha! ha! ha! But you are wrong for once, my lord. Ha! ha! He was quite sober, and very attentive to his wife. We mustn't believe half what we hear, of course; but really I have seen him treat her very rudely on this very platform. But this morning he was like a bridegroom. Never too late to mend, eh? Well, don't let me detain you,' and he fussed away.

During the rest of his drive Lord Wadehurst formed and reformed several theories about Dick's movements. They came in this order: 'He went to the Manor House to tell Lady Gault that I had expelled him, and perhaps, angered by this, to have it out with Sir Claude "in his own way," as he threatened. No, that could

not be. To waylay and beat the man in his own grounds would compromise the woman. Dick was not such a fool as to do that. The most probable solution was that, having seen Lady Gault, or whilst waiting to see her, he found himself (as he supposed) detected by Spaulding and the gardener's boy, and fled. Thinking that there would be a hue and cry after him, he did not return to the Crown. To do so would have been to run his head into a trap; and now he is hiding till he knows how much or how little has been discovered. Hiding? Why, of course. That is another reason why he has not gone to his regular lodgings, for fear Sir Claude should follow him there. Hiding, and no one seeking him but poor afflicted Frank!

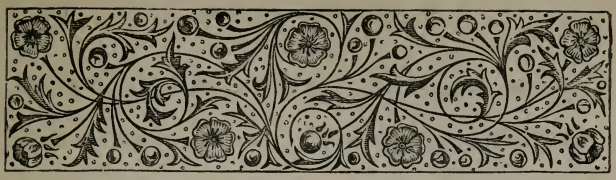
'The wicked fly when no man pursueth,' thought his lordship piously; 'for

most assuredly, if he had been detected after the affair of Sunday in Fairlock churchyard, Lady Gault would not have received those lover-like attentions at the railway-station which Daly had noticed. Hiding? Where? In London? That is the best place for anyone to hide in. But how did he get to London? Walk back to Tonbridge Junction and take the train there? No, it would have to pass Wadehurst, and he be recognised. Go on to Redhill? A long way; but he was a good walker, and he had all night to make it. Hiding! Was he the sort of man to hide? What use in hiding, when the truth—if known—would have to be faced sooner or later? Was his not just the disposition to brazen it out, and take the chances? Hiding!

'My God!' exclaimed Lord Wadehurst,

almost aloud, as a sudden fear struck him; 'that ruffian and his man might have fallen upon him and killed him. His dead body may be sunk in the lake or buried in the woods, and this new behaviour towards Lady Gault be put on to allay her suspicions. There must be—there *is* foul play. With all his faults, he is no sneak. He would not hide.'

That night he telegraphed to a detective agency to send a reliable man at once to Wadehurst.



CHAPTER VII.

MARY MARTIN'S HEADACHE.

It was an open secret that Sir Claude's stud-groom, Mr. Stephen Spaulding, and my lady's own maid (officially known as *Mrs.* Martin) were engaged to be married, and there did not appear to be any just cause or impediment why they should not be joined together in matrimony. Spaulding was more than willing, and he had his master's consent. Mary hesitated for her lady's sake. She was the only servant who slept in the house (occupying a room next to that of Lady Gault), and was some

sort of protection to her. All the rest of the household lived in the wing which had been built over the rear part of the moat, and so were out of sight, and almost of sound, of anything that might happen. Poor Frances had declared that she would die of fright if left alone at her husband's mercy in that great silent grange; and Mary—who was honestly attached to her—consented to remain single for awhile.

Spaulding had quarters in the stable-yard quite good enough for a married man. His salary was high, and his pickings numerous. He had saved money, and did not see the use of wasting time in single blessedness. I cannot say that he was deeply in love—perhaps he was only uncomfortable; or it may be that he had lately seen things which made him regard

a partnership with the blue-eyed lady's-maid as likely to be a profitable one.

He took his meals in the housekeeper's room, over which Mrs. Goodlake presided with beneficent despotism. She has already given her opinion of servants prying into things which her old-fashioned wisdom led her to think did not concern them ; and therefore you may be sure there was no flavouring of scandal to the good things with which her fellow (upper) servants were regaled. But the whole house was full of it. A row of unusual severity, even in that unhappy ménage, had convulsed it on Monday night, and thrown a deep shadow over the following days.

Monday, be it remembered, was the date of Dick's exodus from Wadehurst. On that night, after all the servants had retired to their quarters in the north wing

of the Manor House, screams had been heard, and the scuffling of feet, and the slamming of doors, and Martin had been seen rushing frantically to the stables, whence she returned with Spaulding; and the pair had gone round by the front, and then disappeared together. Neither master nor mistress appeared during all the next day, and Martin only came down once towards the evening.

Sir Claude and Lady Gault went to town on Wednesday morning, *unattended*—a most unusual thing. The thick veil worn by my lady as she passed through the hall could not hide the fact that she was weeping, and she appeared very reluctant to go. In fact, as we know, they nearly missed the train. Martin had come down to breakfast in the housekeeper's room as usual, her head and part of her face

wrapped in a lace nubia. She ate nothing, and appeared to be in a highly nervous state. Now, Mary Martin was not given up to nerves. She was usually—as Sir Claude had found out—a remarkably strong-minded and resolute young woman. As she left the table, she said :

'I have got a fearful headache, dear Mrs. Goodlake, and my lady has excused me. I'm going to have a good rest, so please don't let me be disturbed all day.'

Mrs. Goodlake, not being entirely pleased with the conduct of the lady's-maid, replied dryly, 'Just as you please,' and Mary retired, not to appear again.

'If she wants anything,' said the housekeeper to herself, 'she can send for it. *I'm* not going to put myself about for that disrespectful hussy.'

Later on in the day a telegram arrived

from Sir Claude, saying that her ladyship had arranged to remain in London for the present.

This was all that was known. What was suspected would fill this book.

Mr. Spaulding alone took a light-hearted view of it.

'Why, bless your heart,' he said, 'it's the old game. What's the good of making a fuss about it *now?* He,' meaning his master, 'got drunk and abused her,' meaning his mistress. 'Nothing new about *that*, is there? Then Miss Mary gets off her side and jumps in, and he abuses *her*. Next they send for me, and I have to hold him till he sobers down. It's all over—for this time. Yes, Miss Mary did get hurt, and you may take your oath I didn't hold the beggar like a new-born babe after that.'

With Mrs. Goodlake he had to fight the battle of his sweetheart.

'It seems,' said the housekeeper, 'that after fifty-five years' service in this family I am to be treated as though I was a nobody, and a chit of twenty is to take on as though she were in my place. She,' meaning, of course, Mary Martin, 'should have come to me.'

'My dear Mrs. Goodlake,' expostulated the stud-groom, 'what could you have done?'

'Given my orders, sir,' replied the old lady with dignity.

Spaulding bit his lip.

'Have you ever seen master when he is crazy drunk?' he asked.

Wild horses could not have torn an admission in the affirmative from this faithful old servant, and, alas! she could not say nay. She dodged.

'That is no business of yours, Mr. Spaulding,' was her reply; 'and it hasn't anything to do with what I'm talking about now. Here's a young unmarried girl who runs out of a house *where I am* at midnight, and goes to a young unmarried man with whom she's keeping company, and brings him back with her; and they remain upstairs, doing God knows what, till morning.'

'In company of their master and mistress. Don't forget that, Mrs. Goodlake. This young man and this young woman were acting all the time under orders from their mistress, and for the benefit of their master. Of course you'd have liked to have a finger in the pie, but it was for my lady to say if you should or you shouldn't.'

This was intended as a clincher, but it did not clinch.

'It is probable,' said the old housekeeper stiffly, 'that my lady did not know what she was about.'

'Why, there you've hit it,' said Spaulding, with a dry laugh. 'I don't think any of us knew much what we were about. Come, come, don't you try to make things worse than they are. If Miss Mary had *your* head on her shoulders, she might have acted different. She did her best, and let me tell you she's a game one.'

'It is not a question of what you call *gameness*, Mr. Spaulding, but of propriety; and now I think about it, I'm not at all sure that my lady sent her out for you.'

The good old housekeeper was nettled at the insinuation that she was not wanted, and the flattering allusion to her 'head' was thrown away.

'Ladies,' she added, somewhat spite-

fully, 'do not generally send to the stables for assistance.'

An evil flash came into Spaulding's little gray eyes. He knew he was getting the worst of it, and muttered :

'Ladies do a heap of things nowadays that *you* don't understand. You're on the quarrel, so it's no use talking. Only don't you go and set yourself up against Mary Martin, or you'll get the worst of it.'

Mrs. Goodlake tossed her handsome gray head in scorn. Such a warning to her seemed below notice, but the time came when she remembered it to her sorrow.

I have seen figure-heads on several German nut-crackers which might be taken as portraits of Mr. Spaulding. His features were wooden and hard. His eyes were cold steel-gray ; his lips were thin.

Yet he was by no means an ill-looking man. His clothes fitted him to perfection, and were not 'horsey.' He was never hot or cold, or in a hurry; and gave you the idea that you might hit him with a brick *anywhere* without leaving a mark or causing him to wince.

After his encounter with Mrs. Goodlake, he returned to the stables, and ordered his own particular dog-cart.

'Put *Hamet* in,' he told the groom. 'I've got to get to Maidstone and back before night. Want to see a man about those horses.'

Then he lit a cigar, went up to his room, and helped himself to a glass—a big one—of brandy.

'D——d old cat!' he muttered. 'We should have had her in it. She'd go through fire and water for him. And,

Lord! how she might help us to-night.'

He was back in time for supper, and greeted the housekeeper as though he had never thought of her in connection with any cat, old or young.

'I've made a good deal to-day,' he observed. 'Sold three of the five horses master don't want to keep—sold them well.'

'Ain't he going to hunt any more?' asked the butler.

'Why, bless you! yes; but those weeds are not up to his weight. How's Miss Mary?'

This question was addressed to Mrs. Goodlake, who had not spoken during the report.

'I cannot tell you, Mr. Spaulding,' she

replied. 'Miss Mary gave *orders* this morning that she was not to be disturbed. *I* have not disturbed her, and have taken care that no one else should. I always obey *orders*, Mr. Spaulding.'

The shadow of a smile passed over his face.

'So you must ask for yourself, or, if you please, I will send one of the maids up to inquire.'

The dear old dame was relenting. It served the saucy chit right, she thought, to be taken at her word, and left alone with her headache, and not even a cup of tea to comfort her, all day long; but now——

Further reflection was cut short by the appearance of Mary herself, and it seemed as though she had overheard part at least of the preceding conversation; for her first words were:

'No occasion, dear Mrs. Goodlake. Here I am to answer for myself, and, thanks to your *so* kind attention to my request, I have had a long, long sleep. Oh, I'm all right now. Are you not going to give me a chair, Mr. Spaulding?'

Mr. Spaulding returned to his own quarters, where he found the head-gardener waiting for him—as often happened—to have a chat about things in general over a pipe and glass of 'Scotch' before going to bed. But this time there was something in particular to talk about, and for its origin we must go back some few hours.

As soon as Mr. Barbour had left the lodge, good Mrs. Pell deranged a certain garment of her first-born, and, in the language of the poet,

'Cruel only to be kind,
To his excessive dolour,
Gave him several slaps behind.'

This was for his saying *anything* against Mr. Dick, and was only an instalment of what might be administered if what he told should turn out to be false. So his father—a massive Scotchman, without a shade of guile in his big head—told Spaulding all about Mr. Barbour's visit, and the result of inquiries it had caused him (at his wife's suggestion) to make at the Crown. This latter subject interested Spaulding greatly, and he went back and back again to it.

'Looks odd, don't it, now?' he asked, 'that old Wadehurst shouldn't know where Mr. Dick is, and his son so bad! Looks like as though there had been a row.'

'But wus he in the shroobery Monday nicht?' queried the Scot, coming back to his point.

'Maybe he was; he's been there before. Maybe he wasn't. He don't come *every* night, I suppose?'

'Were ye in the shroobery yersel' Monday nicht?'

'Well now, Pell, look here! When you were courting, didn't you ever take a walk with your sweetheart of a fine night?'

'Monday was no' a fine nicht.'

Spaulding laughed.

'It's never mind the weather, when sweethearts are together,' he rejoined. 'I knew a man who did all his courting under an umbrella. How do you know that they were sending telegrams after Mr. Dick all yesterday?'

'Sin' the lord came speering to the

Crown, every auld wife in the toon has been clacking aboot it.'

'I was away—at Maidstone, selling horses,' Spaulding observed. 'I only got back in time for supper.'

'Aweel, now — anent the shroobery——'

'What was your boy doing there?'

'He were just poaching—the ree-probate!' replied Pell, with a grin. 'I gard him show me his wires.'

'Then he told you the truth?'

'He did—he did. I'll no blame the bairn for the rabbits. It's a fad o' my laddie's to see the wee brown beesties skirling aboot; and they're just de-vastation to me pinks and carnations; but I'd no like to think that Willie tould a lee.'

'Oh, Willie's a good boy—rabbiting and all. And look here, Pell, his mother

spanked him for not minding his business. Don't you think, considering all this fuss about Mr. Dick, that it would be a good thing for *all* of us to mind our own business? We might get a spanking (so to speak) if we don't.'

'Ye've a long head, Spaulding,' said the Scot, rubbing his own. 'I'll no say that you're wrang.'

'Have another tot,' replied the stud-groom, pushing the whisky-bottle to his visitor.

Left alone, Mr. Spaulding took a London newspaper of that day out of the pocket of the overcoat in which he had returned from his horse-dealing journey, and looked it over carefully.

'Yes—here it is!' he said; and this was what he found:

'We regret to announce the sudden and serious illness of the Hon. Frank Birkett, only son and heir of Lord Wadehurst.'

'They were like brothers,' the reader mused. 'That should fetch him, wherever he may be.'

Early on the day following a thunderbolt fell out of a yellow envelope addressed to Mrs. Goodlake, and signed 'Claude Gault':

'*You will pay Mary Martin the wages due to her up to this day, and discharge her from my service at once.*'

To the old housekeeper's utter surprise and indignation, Mr. Spaulding ordered Lady Gault's own brougham to take the discharged lady's-maid to the station, and went up to London with her himself.

CHAPTER VIII.

A LESSON IN CRIME.

FIVE days passed and yet no sign from Dick. Paragraph after paragraph had appeared in the London papers respecting his cousin's state, which was now hopeless. Every device known to detective skill had been employed to find him. His luggage —large and small—remained at his rooms unclaimed. All that could be discovered of him was that during a visit to London, before the row in Fairlock Churchyard, he sold the securities in which the savings put aside for him during his minority—ninety-

five thousand pounds—had been invested; and that on the Tuesday after his sudden departure from his uncle's house he drew this money from his bank, taking notes, and the unusually large amount of six hundred pounds in gold. So, as the detective summed up to Lord Wadehurst, there were two things pretty clear—one, that he intended to do something for which he required a large amount of ready money; and the other, that he arrived safe and sound in London. Could his lordship throw any light on the first point? His lordship could not. The securities in question were what Americans call 'gilt edged,' safe, and bearing good interest. He did not bet or gamble. So far as his uncle was aware, he did not owe fifty pounds to anyone. He had never spoken of investing in any business. Asked if there was a woman in the case,

Lord Wadehurst hesitated a little, but after reflection said 'No.' There was indeed no woman in the case, from its moneyed side.

'So that is all you have to tell me?' he said, in a tone of angry disappointment.

'All,' replied the detective; 'but I should like to ask your lordship this one question: Are you dealing fairly with me?'

'If you want more money, say so.'

'It is not money I'm after, but confidence.'

'My good man, I have told you all I know.'

'Maybe, but—well, I'll tell you. There's nothing like being open and aboveboard in these things. There's another inquiry going on about Mr. Richard Birkett.'

'By whom?'

'Ah! there you beat me. *I'm being watched*, and there's another man, and a sharp one too, on the same track. Of course, I've got him shadowed. He's been to the lawyer and the broker and the bank. He went to Liverpool after a gentleman who changed a hundred-pound note for "greenbacks," and had his trip for his pains. He's pretending to make love to the servant girl at 87, Ashford Street, hoping to pump something out there. Oh, he's doing his work well! The only part of it I don't quite understand is why he hasn't come down here. Now, who can be interested in this except your lordship?'

'Lady Gault,' was the quick and emphatic reply.

'Maybe, but I don't see why. He's got her into trouble enough already.

Seems to me that, having some move of his own in his mind, and having to leave this house sooner than he expected, he went to the Manor Monday night, just to wish her good-bye. After that knock down, he couldn't go there openly; so it was "over the garden wall" on the chance of seeing her. Did he see her? If they met, the gardener's boy and Spaulding would have peached, and there'd have been the devil to pay.'

'There was some disturbance that night.'

'About the black-eyed lady's-maid? Yes. Sir Claude was carrying on with her so that she had to run to her sweetheart in the stables for protection. That's why Lady Gault wouldn't take the girl with her to London. That's why she was discharged. That's how they made it up

about Mr. Dick—as he's called—and went off next morning like two turtle-doves. The lady had got what the lawyers call a "set off"—don't you see? *Her* gentleman was to be sent about his business, and *his* girl to be discharged; and all was to be lovely for ever.'

'From this point of view,' asked his lordship, 'how do you account for their not having attended Miss Heath's wedding?'

'Easily,' the detective replied, taking out his notebook and reading: 'Wednesday, Nov. 19—London. Sir Claude and Lady Gault arrived at Charing Cross station from Fairlock by the 11.15 train, and went to rooms at the Métropole, which had been taken for them. At 11.30 a.m. Lady G. sent out a prescription, which was made up at Black's in the Strand. It contained a good lot of chloral. At about

the same time Sir Claude ordered a bottle of brandy, which was taken up to his room. At 1.20 Lady G. left the hotel, carrying a dressing-bag (dark green leather, with gilt fastenings), and did not return. At two o'clock Sir Claude sent for another bottle of brandy, and it was noticed by the waiter who served it that he was then more than three-parts drunk. He left the following afternoon (Thursday, the 20th) quite sober.'

'They must have quarrelled again.'

'A man who drinks a whole bottle of brandy between half-past eleven in the morning and two at noon is apt to be quarrelsome. Anyhow, he wasn't in a fit state to be at a wedding, and I suppose his lady didn't like to go alone. That answers your lordship's question. Now let me get back. Mr. Dick evidently

thought that he had been seen in the Manor House gardens, or he would have gone back to the Crown for his dog-cart. He got to London somehow and drew that money. If the poor young gentleman upstairs could speak, we should know for what that money was required; but the very fact of his wanting to see his cousin, and *expecting* him to come, shows that it wasn't wanted to run away with, and that he *could* come.'

'You beg the question that he confided in my son.'

'If my information be correct, I think it fair to do so. Very few brothers are better friends than they were. I heard someone say that if Mr. Dick knew that Mr. Birkett was ill, wild horses couldn't keep him from his side. That's the sort of terms they were on.'

'And yet,' said Lord Wadehurst bitterly, 'he keeps away. It is so heartless, so ungrateful!'

'Now you're begging the question that he knows.'

'Mr. Biggs,' replied his employer, 'I do not understand you. You contend that my nephew has not gone away. If this be so, he must have seen some of the notices that have been published respecting his cousin's severe attack and critical position.'

'The first of those notices was published on the Wednesday morning,' replied the detective. 'It is my opinion that Mr. Dick met with foul play some time on Tuesday night.'

'Good God! Do you think he is dead?'

'Maybe. That will depend upon who

had charge of the job. Some would go clumsily to work and make a murder of it. Some would get all they wanted without risking their necks. There's nothing so hard to work off as a dead body. See now. There isn't a bank in London but is watched by professional thieves for what they can pick up, for what they can snatch, for what they can follow and get at leisure. Mr. Dick draws six hundred sovereigns. Did he take them in a bag? If so, anyone could see it. Did he sow them about in his pockets? If so, any crook would know it by the drag and the swagging of his clothes. He avoided his regular lodgings, and probably went to some quiet place—just proper for a plant. He was followed, and as no alarm was raised, and no complaint made, we must conclude that there were experts in it.

The thing has been done before, and will be again. No violence, no noise, and in a few days or a few weeks the victim wakes up one morning with a bad headache on Hampstead Heath, or on board a ship bound for Valparaiso, and hasn't an idea what has happened to him.'

'Unconscious for weeks, Mr. Biggs? Incredible!'

'Your lordship is thinking of old times, before the hypodermic syringe was invented,' replied the detective quietly. 'Once get a man under *that* influence, and he is all right—much handier to deal with than if he were dead. You want to move him? Well, he's a poor gentleman in a fit, or a bad lot that's always getting drunk. He can't contradict you. You get him where you want him, and then he's the poor sick gentleman upstairs who mustn't

be disturbed. That's the game. You're his brother and his sister—there's generally a woman in it—or his wife and his son—according to age—and no one thinks of interfering. You watch your time, and let him loose.'

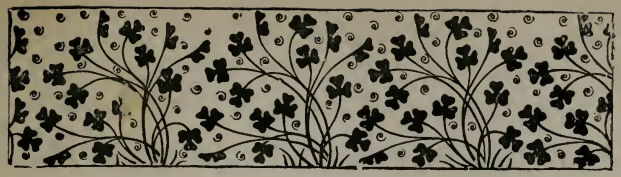
Lord Wadehurst listened to this lesson in crime with bent brows. The off-hand ways and superior knowledge affected by Mr. Biggs did not please him. He sharply asked :

'What do you advise ?'

'The case must be reported to the regular police. They won't do a bit of good, but it's the right thing to do, and there'll be a row if it isn't done. The other party will blow, sooner or later, if we don't.'

'I will think it over, Mr. Biggs. In the meantime go and get some luncheon.'

The detective returned to town, and found a disagreeable surprise awaiting him. Like so many of his trade, he got up a theory first, and then picked out facts to suit it. Now an entirely new theory was sprung upon him, and he felt—to use his own words—as though he ought to kick himself for not having thought of it before.



CHAPTER IX.

'SHE HAS CONSENTED.'

LORD WADEHURST grudged every moment that was not spent by the bedside of his son. Let us pass over what he saw. Many know by heart the weary waiting for the changes which do not come, the hopeful ignoring of the change which is coming. Those happy ones who have not seen a dear life pass away under their eyes, and know not the misery of the thought that nothing they can do will save it, may rest in blissful ignorance. The great London doctor—who had been told the whole truth

as to the moving cause of poor Frank's seizure—persisted in his opinion that the sight of his cousin *might* cause a counter-shock, out of which good *might* come ; and he added fuel to the fire already burning in Lord Wadehurst's heart against the absent Dick by comments upon his 'want of good feeling.' For although his lordship had to give up—with regret—his own theory as to 'foul play,' he would not accept that of Mr. Biggs. Mr. Biggs had presumed to dictate, had suggested that his ideas were old-fashioned, and that was enough to discredit him.

No ; Dick had not fallen amongst thieves. He was hiding out of spite. He was a cold-hearted hypocrite. His whole life at Wadehurst was an acted lie. His affection for his cousin was put on to enjoy the luxuries their companion-

ship assured him. As soon as the one was lost, he cast aside the other. He was taking revenge for his expulsion. Nay, worse still! he was plotting the death of the boy who alone stood between him and the barony of Wadehurst. 'Anger is like the letting out of waters.' It saps the barriers of truth and justice, and whirls us along upon its waves of hatred, malice, and all uncharitableness.

The letter written by Frank, just before his attack, to Dick in London, had been returned, and read for any clue it might contain. The sorrowing father saw himself for the first time, and with a shudder, as these bright boys had seen him.

They had been in the habit of calling him 'Bogey.' He was becoming 'almost human'! In the unfinished writing left upon his desk, Frank had repented: 'We won't

call him "Bogey" any more. It isn't fair.' Oh, what a heart of gold was here! All those years of neglect and unkindness swept away by one touch of love! The words that followed could hardly be read for the tears which fell upon them.

'It has been more than half our fault, old man,' Frank wrote. 'Think of all the things we've done to draw him. What have we ever given up to try and please him? Let us begin all over again on a clean slate. Just consider the lonely life he leads—it's enough to make a saint cross. After to-night I shall know how to draw him—*the right way*—and between us both we'll make quite a nice chirpy old gentleman of him in time.'

From a Chesterfield point of view, the style of this epistle is open to objection. Written of another father, Lord Wade-

hurst would have considered it excessively pert and disrespectful; but, oh, the balm it spread upon his aching heart! What a wide approach to hope, what never-ending avenues to happiness, those light words opened up!

Good Mr. Barbour had called as ordered the morning after his interview with Mrs. Pell, and was much distressed to find himself superseded by a regular detective. Nevertheless, he felt it his duty to continue the investigation, and considered himself fortunate in securing Mr. Spaulding (who had returned) as an ally. In this way the stud-groom became aware of all that passed at Wadehurst, and of the different views taken as to Dick's disappearance.

On the table of his now abandoned

library, arranged in serried ranks, reposed unopened the contents of Lord Wadehurst's mail-bags — blue-books, reports, pamphlets, and the proof-sheets of his last article, proving that all the recent misfortunes of her Majesty's Ministers arose from their obstinate rejection of his advice. Time was when he would have gone over these with a thrill of delight, adding an extra sting here, and polishing up a sarcasm there; but now he had no heart for the work. What were politics to him when his boy lay dying?

Several letters for Frank were brought up as a matter of ceremony to the sick-room, and placed on the mantel; and one of them had frequently attracted Lord Wadehurst's attention. On a dirty envelope, in an unformed and crooked hand, was written '*The honorable Mr. Birkett*,

Esquire. Privit,' and the post-mark was Islington—a begging-letter, evidently.

The long nights set in early. No one who has not watched as this man did knows how slowly the dark hours can drag their weary lengths towards the dawn. There was absolutely nothing to be done but wait. He could not read, he would not try to sleep, lest the hoped-for moment of consciousness might come and pass. He sat and thought—thought over for the tenth time all the detective had told him that day; thought over some gossip which Mr. Barbour had brought him in the evening, and which seemed to confirm his own theory as to Dick's guilt; and in the midst of all this thinking that wretched scrawl on the mantelpiece—'*The honorable Mr. Birkett, Esquire. Privit*'—persisted in coming before his mind's eye. A

begging-letter? Someone in want. Someone who thought that Frank would help him. Someone, perhaps, whom Frank would *like* to help. Someone who, if helped, would say 'God bless him!' and might pray for him. There is a germ of superstition in the hardest head. A week ago Lord Wadehurst would have scoffed at the notion that a law of Nature could be repealed by prayer. A week ago he held philosophical objections to the encouragement of beggars. Now he found himself lifting the seal of the begging. letter, and saying to himself:

'The man shall have what he wants, for Frank's sake.'

He tore the dirty envelope in twain and threw it on the floor, and there appeared another letter properly addressed, and *in Dick's own handwriting!*

Here was the secret—here the clue to all!

It almost fell from his trembling hands. A blindness came over his eyes. Here was what would put an end to all doubt; and yet he stood irresolute, turning the paper over and over, and wondering what it might contain.

At last he pulled himself together, took it into his own room, turned up the lamp, and read thus:

'DEAR OLD MAN,

'It's all right, and you were all wrong. She has consented—bless her dear heart!—and off we go. Of course, there will be a hideous row, and I shall be the best abused man in England for a week or two. I don't mind a bit. I shall save the woman I love—and who loves me—from

a life of misery, and things will blow over in time. You won't get this till we are well out of reach, and if my plans go right (and I think they will) the devil himself cannot catch us.

'The worst part of it is leaving you. But cheer up. It won't be for very long I dare say. Perhaps, when I am gone, Bogey will behave himself. So it may be for your good. "Wait till the clouds roll by, Jenny," and then you'll hear again from your loving

'DICK.'

A grim smile curdled over Lord Wadehurst's face as he read this letter, and realized what was writ between the lines. The writer had indeed 'got even' with Sir Claude in his 'own way.' He had struck promptly and hard. The house of Gault had received a supreme humiliation

at the hands of the house of Birkett. The humiliation would endure, but the humiliator could be repudiated. No necessity now for explanations or excuses for Dick's banishment. He had run away with another man's wife, and there was an end of him.

> 'The sword that slew the slayer
> Was itself amongst the slain.'

'And they are trying to hush it up,' mused his lordship—'trying to catch them and bring her back. That other detective of whom Biggs spoke is in Sir Claude's pay, of course.'

Reprobate as Dick was, it gave his noble uncle some satisfaction to think that he had outwitted the enemy so far.

He was roused from these musings by the hurried entrance of the nurse with good news. Her patient had recovered

consciousness; his eyes were open; he was even moving his left arm. He did move anon; he recognised his father as he bent over him, pressed his hand, and smiled.

The great London doctor had left orders that he was to be summoned if any change took place. At break of day a groom was despatched with a telegram to Sir Charles, and returned with one for Lord Wadehurst, which had arrived the night before, but too late for transmission. It came from the Private Inquiry Office to which Mr. Biggs was attached, and read:

'New developments. Lady Gault is missing. Am following up the clue.

'SPIERS AND CO.'

To which they received in reply:

'Case mismanaged by you from the

beginning. Made worse by mention of name. Suspend all operations and send in account.

'WADEHURST.'

It did his lordship good to have this fling at Mr. Biggs.

The famous specialist and Mr. Barbour arrived almost together. The latter clasped his hands devoutly, and declared that the Lord had heard his prayers. The former was not so sanguine. There was a change, certainly—a very remarkable change. The next twelve hours would show to what it tended.

'Let him have as much nourishment as he can be induced to take, and be kept perfectly quiet,' he wound up. 'I think that Mr. Crawford'—the local practitioner—'understands the case thoroughly.

There will, perhaps, be no necessity to send for me again.'

The nurse understood him, and feared against hope. The father hoped against fear.

Later on he took Mr. Barbour aside and disclosed the 'new developments.'

'These idiots,' referring to Spiers and Co., he said, 'by using the woman's name in a telegram, have upset Sir Claude's plan. The affair cannot be kept secret any longer, and I consider it my duty to act openly. I might be misunderstood hereafter if I did not. You will therefore be good enough to go up to town at once, see Sir Claude's solicitors, show them this' —Dick's letter—'and allow them to take a copy of it if they so desire.'

Mr. Barbour departed with chastened joy. The interloping detective had been

deposed. He was again Lord Wadehurst's confidential agent, and his lordship had a better living than Fairlock in his gift.

CHAPTER X.

THE HONEYMOON.

Mr. Macgruther and his bride visited the great capitals of Europe on their wedding tour, and received exceptional recognition. In and out of Parliament the bridegroom had rendered valuable services to the Governments of France and Austria; a subject on which he was a recognised expert was perplexing that of Italy; and the bride was a very pretty woman. She found herself a *persona grata* alike with famous statesmen and the *grandes dames* of the Courts in which they moved, and her

mind's eyes opened to possibilities to which they had hitherto been shut. The varied romances of her life went out of it as she left the church on Mr. Macgruther's arm. There could be no more tender dalliance with despairing detrimentals in dimly-lit conservatories ; no more scheming to circumvent poor dear mamma with regard to lordly but undesirable gentlemen forbidden the house. No one could be kinder—in his cold way—than her permanent lord ; but she knew he was not a man with whom she could trifle.

One night, when they had returned to their hotel from a function at which some very great people had assisted, she asked him :

'Well, how did I behave ?'

'You were charming,' he replied gallantly ; 'only——'

'Only what?'

'I do not find you quite so animated as you used to be.'

'I am a married woman now.'

This jarred.

'I hope there is nothing in your married life to make you less happy than you were as a girl,' he said rather sadly.

'I am quite happy,' she replied, 'and I am getting wise. Tell me,' taking a seat close beside him, and to his great inward delight putting a plump white arm round his neck, 'tell me what you would think if one day I made for you such a *salon* as Madame de Lansdoff has?'

'That would indeed be a success.'

'Why not?' gaily. 'You are rich, and I am pretty.'

'The partnership capital is unfairly divided,' he answered her. 'There are

many men far richer than I am, but no woman so pretty as you.'

'That is the nicest thing you have ever said, and it is very good and dear of you to say it. Accustom yourself to pay such pretty compliments as that, and our *salon* is made.'

'A *salon* of two?'

'You know what I mean. As for me, I am feeling my way. I am not going to take a hand in any game until I have learned it.'

'Quite right.'

'I am forming myself on the Princess and Madame de Lansdoff and her set. Animation! We English have no idea of it. We giggle, and we jerk ourselves. We are to these Austrian and Italian women what a guinea-pig is to a squirrel. Do you know why we have no *salons?*

Because we have ground ourselves down to one dull level, and are afraid of clever people. Did you notice the Countess to-night? She had an audience before she was in the room ten minutes. She not only said all sorts of witty things herself, but she knew how to draw out other people, and wit breeds wit. What should we do at home? She'd scare us out of our wits. We should say, "This is dreadful!" We may laugh in the wrong place. She may say something to us and expect a smart answer; and we should fly from her, as though she were a pestilence, or wore darned gloves, and grunt monosyllables at each other.'

'And how do you propose to change this? Please go on. I am much interested.'

And he was. It was the first real con-

versation he had held with his bride. They had talked things over, and exchanged remarks, and asked and answered questions, but *conversation* is a different thing; and this was it.

'I think it is our fault,' she continued with a smile; 'we have taught the men to be stupid. If a score of bright women were to get together and resolve that they would have no man about them who didn't amuse them, there would be a good beginning. But we offer a premium for silliness. We are faithless to ourselves. We are afraid to shine.'

'Under the conditions you mention, this may apply also to the men.'

'No doubt it does, and so we go round, round, round; being dull, because we expect dulness. We take no interest in what we do. We run here and there, like

a flock of sheep, because other people go; and to show our gowns. We go to Ascot and Goodwood, and don't care for the races. We go to Henley, and are bored by the boats. We go to Lord's without an idea of cricket; and when the Eton captain spoons up a ball to "point," we—wearing the light blue—simper "Dear me! how nice!"'

'You, at least, appear to understand the game.'

'Of course, Dick Birkett taught it me years ago. Fan and I used to long-stop for him and Frank, practising. Poor Frank! I hope he's better.'

'Let us get back to our subject,' said Macgruther. 'What is your plan of reform?'

'I have no plan. Some woman must creep up gradually into such a position as to make her will a social law.'

'How?'

'Ah! there's the rub. I sometimes think that we might get in the small end of the wedge by taking interest in people and things, and showing it. See how American women have got on in London! A man says, "I think I can find you a seat," or some such simple thing, and they brighten up all over as though he had said, "I think I can find you a dodo in a gold cage." They never look as if they were bored, and of course they often are. They seem to start with the idea that there is something coming—something to be got that is pleasant. They go about the world scratching like hens, and find lots of things. We sit on our perches like so many Poll parrots and wait for our pap. We haven't sense enough to see that the other sort of thing pays, or else

we pretend to look down upon it because it's Yankee. My coming woman won't throw away a chance, though it came from Timbuctoo. Once she can make dulness ridiculous, half the battle is won.'

'Will you be that woman?' her husband asked, smiling at her warmth.

'I *will* try,' she replied, 'and you must help me.'

'I care little for society.'

'You must get over that, dear. You have a young wife who loves it, with all its faults.'

'How about its vices? Young and inexperienced as you are, you must know that the morals of what we call "society" are fearfully lax.'

'*Lax* is the word. We are not brilliantly vicious, as our great-grandfathers and great-grandmothers were. We are

bad out of idleness and want of something else to do. What I call *dulness* is the root of all the evil. Let people learn to think and reason and ask themselves "why?" for two months—and, my goodness! what a revolution there would be!'

Alexander Macgruther drew his wife's face to his shoulder and kissed it. He was very pleased. He had married her for her beauty—he began to respect her for her brains. His political party had few bright women. The other side was all a-bloom with them. Yes, that *salon* was not on the first floor of a *château en Espagne*, as he thought when she first mentioned the word.

As for Bertha, her new life did not pinch anywhere. The frequent heart-quakes of her maidenhood had hardened her. The respect with which her husband

was received everywhere made her proud of him. She found that other women admired him, which was a great consolation; for when one marries a man much older than one's self, the horror is lest other women should say 'poor thing!' No one thought 'poor thing!' of Bertha. On the Continent the husband is usually the elder. A princess told her that her husband was 'adorable,' and a countess who ruled a Court praised his 'distinguished air.' And really Alexander Macgruther was a fine man.

Looking around her, she saw that within the grasp of a handsome woman, with a rich and famous husband, there was a delight almost as good as flirting—*power*. Looking back, she began to realize that in many of her little 'affairs' love for the man of the moment was sub-

ordinate to love of power over him—power to please or to pain, power to fire his eyes, or whiten his lips, or to set his teeth grinding at a rival. A power—as some of her young married friends assured her—that was not of a permanent order. She had, indeed, seen husbands grind their teeth, but one who shivered at the passing touch of his wife's dress had yet to be introduced. She had a long life before her. She must live for something. With high spirits, plenty of pluck, and *now* ambition, she could not rest as a pretty doll to be dressed up in fine clothes and shown round for admiration. She would become a leader, and snub people.

But how about her lord? She knew that party lines penned him in the fold of the women's rights movement, and that in his heart he was a wolf outside. He was,

in fact, for *other men's* women's rights, and if presented with the dire alternative of seeing one of his *own* women (his sister or his wife, for example) spouting on a platform or smoking a pipe in a music-hall, he would have accepted the latter as the lesser evil of the two. A forward woman was an abomination in his sight.

So Bertha felt some trepidation when she asked :

'What would you think if some day I made for you such a *salon* as Madame de Lansdoff has ?'

The result made her very happy, and so, of course, a damper had to fall.

Returning from a drive with one of the *grandes dames* upon whom she was forming herself, she found her husband looking unusually grave.

'I have had a letter from your father,'

he said, clearing his throat. 'He is well. Your mother is well.'

'Oh, Alex!' she cried, 'there's bad news. You wouldn't begin like that if there wasn't.'

'There is—very bad news.'

'Of George, or Archie? Oh!' clasping her hands, 'what has happened?'

'Your brothers are not mentioned. Lady Gault——'

'Poor dear Fan! What has that brute done to her now?'

'I am sorry to say, my dear, that the sin is not on *his* side. She has left him.'

'And serve him right! I hope papa and mamma will not send her back this time,' said Bertha warmly.

'She has eloped.'

'Impossible!'

'I should have said so yesterday, but it

is unfortunately true. She has eloped with Mr. Richard Birkett.'

'With Dick? Absurd! Alex, how can you?'

'If you doubt me, read for yourself;' and he handed her Mr. Heath's letter.

She had turned deadly pale, and was trembling all over. Her husband placed his finger on the damning words. She flung the paper from her with a wild hysterical cry.

'Oh, the shame of it!—my own sister!—the shame of it! It will kill me. How shall I ever lift my head again! My own sister!'

There was no comfort for her. Macgruther's stern morality held that *nothing* could justify a wife in leaving her husband with another man.

She picked up the letter and read it

through with bitter comments—some in a burst of tears, some with a sharp cry of anger.

'So they chose the very day of our marriage. How considerate of them, and what a pretty wedding-present they left me! I suppose some people are asking now when the other girl will bolt. You poor Alex! it's hard on you. If they had only been quicker about it, you could have got off marrying me. Don't touch me! You know you are thinking about what's bred in the bone coming out in the flesh. You will never love me—never trust me.'

'I am not a Claude Gault,' he answered kindly. 'Nor shall I visit the sins of one sister on the other. It is a hard blow. Let us bear it together as best we can.'

'It is *unbearable!*' she exclaimed. 'Why

did not Claude catch him that night and kill him?—yes, *kill* him. Such a man deserves to die. If Dick Birkett stood where you are, and I had a pistol, I'd kill him myself. And only last night I dreamed of having a *salon*, and being a great lady! In a month or two we shall have the divorce case in all the papers, and it will be, "Macgruther? Oh yes, I know; married a girl young enough to be his daughter. Sister went to the bad, didn't she? Bolted on her wedding-day." Oh, the shame of it!'

In a postscript Mr. Heath had more bad news to tell.

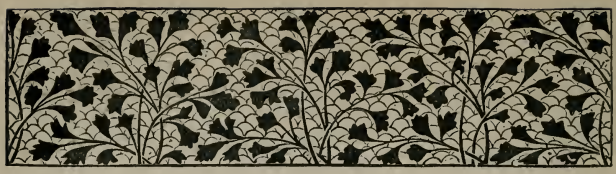
'Poor Lord Wadehurst,' he wrote, 'has lost his son, and all through this villain' (meaning Dick). 'The shock caused by his misconduct brought on one of the seizures to which Frank was subject, and,

after lingering for nearly a fortnight, he died yesterday.'

'There again!' Bertha sobbed, 'the good one has to suffer. Dear, gentle Frank, who would not hurt a fly, he has to be stricken down and die. There is no justice, no mercy! We've only got to be wicked to get ev—ev—everything.'

* * * * *

Dear, gentle Frank was, indeed, at rest; but we know the true cause of that fatal stroke. His return to consciousness, recorded in my last chapter, was, as the great doctor foresaw, the beginning of the end. His last words were, 'Oh, my Dick! —my poor, dear Dick!' as though something had revealed to him that this loved companion, this more than brother, was in trouble and in grief.



CHAPTER XI.

GAULT *v.* GAULT AND BIRKETT.

I HAVE not given you Mr. Heath's letter to his son-in-law *in extenso*, because, written under the excitement of the moment, it was not coherent, and contained some mistakes and many omissions. It will be best to go to the office of Messrs. Lucas and Lucas (the great divorce lawyers employed by Sir Claude Gault) and, with or without permission, look over the 'proofs' they had prepared in the case of *Gault* v. *Gault and Birkett*.

From the evidence to be given by

Stephen Spaulding, Mary Martin, and the Reverend Thomas Barbour, it appeared that the co-respondent (Mr. Richard Birkett) had been a constant visitor at Fairlock Manor for several weeks prior to November 17, and that he and Lady Gault had been seen walking together in secluded parts of the grounds, talking earnestly. Mr. Barbour would say that he felt it his duty as a clergyman to communicate these facts to Sir Claude on Saturday, the 15th, and that a lamentable affray took place in consequence between him and the co-respondent on the following day.

On Monday night, the 17th, Richard Birkett entered the shrubbery of the Manor House in some secret way, probably by scaling the wall, as it would be shown that he did not pass the lodge, and was seen there—first by the gardener's boy, William

Pell, and afterwards by Spaulding and Martin—in the company of Lady Gault. The last-named witnesses saw them meet in a dark walk, and noticed what passed. Mr. Richard seemed very much excited and anxious. Almost his first words (at any rate, the first overheard) were, 'Don't keep me in suspense! Tell me at once!' Lady Gault said something in a low voice, and instantly he threw his arms around her and kissed her. Then they walked up and down, he holding her arm by the elbow, for about a quarter of an hour, whispering. By this time Mr. Richard appeared to be highly elated and her ladyship sad, walking with bent head and hardly answering him.

Having seen and heard so much, and fearing that an elopement would come off there and then, they (the witnesses) deter-

mined that Sir Claude should be called to judge for himself, and Martin went for him. He arrived just in time to see the co-respondent struggling on the top of the wall with a branch of a tree, on which he dropped down to the other side. Spaulding, light and active, took the same route, and gave chase. Sir Claude, not quite sober, could not follow, but went back to the house, roused the servants, got lanterns and dogs, and joined in the hunt. On the other side of the wall were open grass fields, then a line of pheasant covers, then the much-litigated brook, and then a lane leading into the main road to London. The grass gave no track, the woods were drawn blank, the stream was in several places narrow enough for a man like Mr. Richard to jump, and so he got clear away.

Then, according to Mary Martin, who was present, a fearful scene took place between Sir Claude and his wife; he accusing her in no measured words, she protesting by all she held sacred that no word of love had ever passed between herself and Richard Birkett, and that he had come only to tell her that he had quarrelled with his uncle, Lord Wadehurst. At first Sir Claude would not believe her, and became so violent that the witness Martin, fearing personal injury to her mistress, ran to the stables for Spaulding to aid her in protecting the very life of that lady. And yet nothing had been said to Sir Claude so far as to the embrace and kissing. He only knew that Lady Gault and the co-respondent were together in the shrubbery. Eventually he calmed down, and something like a peace was made, so that when they

started on Wednesday morning for Miss Heath's wedding he was 'quite pleasant.'

Charles James, a waiter at the Métropole Hotel, would state facts already known to the reader through the detective Biggs. To recapitulate, Sir Claude got very drunk, and Lady Gault left about half-past one o'clock, with nothing but her dressing-bag. That was the last that was seen of her.

For himself, Sir Claude would say that, deeming it just possible that his wife might have left him innocently (on account of his violence on the Monday night, which he now deeply regretted), and to avoid a public scandal, he did his best to find her and bring her back. He employed detectives to trace her, and, as a means towards that end, to find out what had become of the co-respondent. They failed

utterly. The fugitives had disappeared, as though the ground had opened and swallowed them ; but one left clear indications that he had contemplated a long and far flight before his quarrel with Lord Wadehurst. Banker and broker would depose to this.

Lord Wadehurst would consent, with great reluctance, to say what had passed between him and his nephew with regard to Sir Claude—how he had threatened to get even with him 'in his own way'; and would produce his letter to his (Lord Wadehurst's) late son, which was indeed the touchstone to the whole case.

Learned counsel, commenting on this, would say :

'Gentlemen of the jury, you can tell by the light of these written words exactly what passed in the shrubbery. "Do not

keep me in suspense," he said. "Tell me at once." "What?" "Why, that you consent to fly with me." She replies, and he snatches her to his heart and kisses her. *She has consented.* "All is right," he writes to his cousin, "and you are wrong." This high-minded young gentleman had evidently tried to turn him from his purpose, and, with a noble trust in the honour of his old playmate, had deemed it impossible that she could consent; but he is told in heartless ribaldry, "She has consented, and *off we go.*"'

Such was the case prepared for presentation before a jury of his countrymen on behalf of Sir Claude Gault, but an untoward hitch delayed the trial. The learned judge before whom it was to be heard was not satisfied with the endeavours made by the petitioner to serve the other parties

with notice of the proceedings against them. Reminded of the precautions taken by the co-respondent to baffle pursuit, and of that portion of his letter to his deceased cousin in which he wrote, 'If my plans go right (and I think they will), the devil himself cannot catch us,' his lordship replied dryly that this was merely an expression of opinion by one person as to what another person (not before the Court) could not do.

This spoke in the wheels of justice was the joint production of Mrs. Heath and Sir Claude's younger brother, Horace Gault.

Mrs. Heath, who had yet another daughter to marry, dreaded the threatened exposure, and worked like a beaver in and around the office of the Queen's Proctor, not by any means to obtain his interven-

tion—that might make bad worse—but to get such a menace of it as would frighten the petitioner out of Court.

Horace Gault wanted intervention pure and simple and strong. His big brother had bullied him as a boy, and behaved shabbily when their father died. He loved him not, and the present condition of affairs suited him down to the ground. There was no heir. If a divorce were obtained, there might be one. Sir Claude had a good deal of property in his own right (including the Manor House), but still there was some under entail and the title to go for. He also worried the Queen's Proctor with the usual pleas in bar, but failed to obtain his assistance. Cruelty? That would do; but who in the absence of the wife was to prove it? Sir Claude had been careful not to commit

himself before witnesses, and many a white lie had been told about cuts and bruises to screen him. Everyone knew that he beat his wife, but no one could prove it. Connivance? Out of the question. Had not Sir Claude knocked the man down the first time he saw him, after Mr. Barbour's warning? The evidence as to the other thing, which lawyers know of, had to refer to post-nuptial days, and was not to be had when the pinch came. The alleged dairymaid at Fairlock (too young and pretty for her place), who went to church in silk attire, disappeared; and a lady (the delight of several London music-halls), when approached on the subject, exclaimed:

'What! go against poor old "Polly-and-Scotch"? Not I! Let him have his divorce—perhaps he'll marry me."

But he did not.

It is probable that some of this reached the ear of the Court, and although the judge was by far too good a one to listen to outside gossip, it pointed and strengthened his technical objection.

'It is *your* business to find them, you know,' he told the Q.C. who appeared for Sir Claude; 'and really you must do something more in that direction.'

Some people, when they read the report of these passages, said:

'Silly old man! What is the use of serving them?' (meaning the runaways). 'What *could* they have to say?'

Now, this judge was old, but by no means silly. A man of the world, with intimate knowledge of the men and women who compose it, he was not prepared on all occasions to hold that law was justice.

Something, perhaps, like this passed through his mind: 'Here is a drunken lout who seeks to throw off a wife whom he has driven into sin. He asks for law, and he shall have it; but I will take good care that he shall conform to every rule of it that I can enforce.' And he did so.

Asked to suggest any steps which would be satisfactory to him, he replied that it was no duty of his to advise either side. Asked if an advertisement would do, he said:

'Perhaps, if you show that it will probably come to their notice.'

'My lord,' pleaded the Q.C. in desperation, 'we have not the faintest idea in what quarter of the globe to look for them.'

'Then I am afraid' (from the Bench) 'you will have to wait till you get one.'

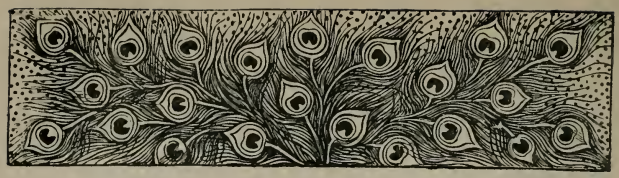
So the case hung fire. Dick had indeed laid his plans well, and the partner of his flight had not (as women will often do) betrayed herself. They might be lodging in Camberwell, or hiding in Darkest Africa or the Ural Mountains, for anything that could be discovered. Some of the Bank of England notes which Dick had taken with him came back, but from widely divergent points—one from Constantinople, one from Boston, one from Melbourne. They had passed through many hands, and abroad one does not write one's name on the back of them. They came in, from first to last, within about six weeks, and so it was impossible that he could have passed them in person at the places named within the time.

Under these circumstances, astute Mrs. Heath pleaded with her son-in-law: Was

it any use going on? Why spend money on a fruitless search? Surely, under all the circumstances, we should not harbour vindictive feelings against poor Fanny; and as for Dick, no jury would give damages against him. Why not let things rest as they were? He had often said his marriage was a failure, that he was not the sort of man to be bothered with a wife. He could not want to marry again. If he did, no decent woman would have him (this was not put in so many words, but clearly implied, though the lady knew there were dozens of mothers ready to pop their daughters down his throat). There would be terrible disclosures in open Court—and so on, and so on.

But Sir Claude was doggedly resolute. He would not see Mrs. Heath. In a hand somewhat less shaky than usual he

acknowledged the receipt of her letters, and declined the propositions therein contained. He would not be drawn into any argument. He would go on, if it cost him every penny that he had and twenty years of his life.



CHAPTER XII.

'DECREE NISI.'

In the meantime great changes had been made at the Manor House. Horses and carriages were sold, and most of the servants dismissed, including the old housekeeper, whose place was filled by—Mary Martin! Mary Martin, whom Sir Claude had summarily dismissed from his service! This was gall to Mrs. Goodlake.

'I've been in the family,' mourned this good and faithful servant, 'girl, wife, and widow, forty-five years, and I'm turned

out in my old age for that hussy! It isn't right to me. It isn't decent that a girl like that should live alone in this house.'

But Mary Martin was not to live alone. Her father came, by arrangement with Sir Claude, to keep her company. She was an important witness in the divorce case, and had to be provided for.

Mr. Wickham Martin, in his younger and better days, had been a solicitor at Cork, but had to leave his country under suspicion of being a 'minion' of the 'base, bloody, and brutal' Chief Secretary who then (and ever since under all Governments has) tyrannized over the 'distressful country,' and all the time he was posing as a patriot of the deepest dye. In point of fact, he was that necessary but despised reptile, an informer.

He came to England with his wife and child, and did not succeed. The Government were ungrateful. His legal talents were not appreciated. He went down, step by step, till he became a 'man in possession' for brokers, and would have starved if his wife (a well-educated and lady-like woman) had not assisted him by what she could earn as a teacher. In this capacity she gained experience which taught her that her handsome daughter would be happier in the housekeeper's room than the schoolroom, and therefore brought her up to be a lady's-maid, much to her father's disgust.

'We are gentlefolk,' the broken-down man whimpered. 'My aunt Jane was cousin to the Countess of Kildbarney. It is too shocking to think that my child should be a servant.'

This, however, did not prevent him from accepting a portion of Mary's wages, or from calling upon her too frequently with the paternal desire to see how his dear child was getting on, and (incidentally) to obtain an advance of three half-crowns.

These visits were terrors to Mary. The appearance of her parent after a tramp from London was not in his favour; and, as bad luck would have it, there were always plenty of people about when he came, with whom he would enter into conversation in an unabashed and airy manner, as though he were an expected and welcome guest. On one occasion he invited himself to a cricket match which was going on, had a discussion upon religious subjects with the Reverend Mr. Barbour, and borrowed a sovereign from Dick.

When Mary was dismissed she went straight to her father, with the result that he appeared next day in a new suit of clothes and took a respectable lodging, in which his daughter afterwards joined him for a time.

Mr. Spaulding did not remain long at Fairlock. He joined his master in London, and assisted in the search for Lady Gault. It seems odd that a trainer of horses should suddenly become 'a gentleman's gentleman'; but odd things were going on all round. Stephen Spaulding became Sir Claude's valet (some said 'keeper'), and took excellent care of him. I think it was Lord Chancellor Thurlow who said of his personal attendant that for two years he had been an excellent servant, for two years more a kind master, and for the rest of his time a d——d tyrant. Sir Claude's

new valet began at the end, and during all the time the divorce proceedings were dragging along his master was a sober man. His tyranny was, therefore, a beneficent one.

First of all he took his master to a famous establishment near Malvern, where he earned golden opinions.

'A remarkably able man,' said the doctor—'cool, firm, and respectful. I wish I had him in my own service.'

Of Sir Claude he reported at the end of his 'cure':

'He is much better in all respects; but take care' (this to Spaulding). 'Total abstinence for at least a year. If he were to taste spirits, and the craving for them returns, I will not answer for the consequences.'

The next move (under medical advice)

was to Broadstairs, where a furnished house was taken.

The deposed housekeeper, Mrs. Goodlake, removed to a pretty cottage on the Wadehurst estate, and induced her brother, a one-armed pensioner whom we have met before, to join her, for company. She had her savings, he his pension, and they made themselves comfortable, keeping hens, cultivating the garden, and discussing over and over again their respective grievances. The good old woman had transferred some of her anger against Mary Martin to the man she would always speak of as '*that* Spaulding.' It was he who, with his spying and his tale-bearing, had brought sorrow and shame upon the old family. He it was who had predicted her own dethronement in favour of his sweetheart. The shutting up of the Manor House was

his work. The dream—night and day—of her age was to get even, in some way, with '*that* Spaulding!'

Mr. Wickham Martin gave himself out to be Sir Claude Gault's private solicitor, and established what he proudly called his 'chambers' in the village. With this recommendation, he laid himself out for general practice, and had already appeared twice at petty sessions as a defender of the innocent. He had also some mysterious business of his own, which took him occasionally to London — first-class. Good food and clean raiment had made another man of him. Mary was no longer ashamed of her father, and his love for her amounted to adoration. All this time Mrs. Martin was travelling in Italy with an old lady of title, partly as her companion, and partly as governess to her orphaned grandchild.

Lord Wadehurst remained alone in his gloomy old house, and became day by day more morose. His triumph over the house of Gault was incomplete. Perhaps there would be no divorce suit, after all. His hatred for Dick so distorted what had passed that he considered him the actual slayer of his son. Very soon after poor Frank's funeral he sent for his solicitor and made his last will.

So the new year came, and was in its flowery and fruity prime, when at last the long worked-for clue was obtained, to the honour and glory of Wickham Martin. The only thorn in his otherwise soft cushion was represented by the repeated refusals of Messrs. Lucas and Lucas to let him have a finger in the divorce pie. Now he had a whole hand in.

Working quietly in his own way—as he

reported—he found an ex-patriot, recently arrived from America, who had fallen in with Dick in Denver, State of Colorado, where he was speculating in silver-mines, with the usual result, *i.e.*, setting herrings to catch sprats, and not catching anything. To this man he confided his intention of moving on to Mexico, where he had actually been seen with a companion who answered the description of Lady Gault. Martin had given his word of honour not to divulge the name of this latter informant, but pledged his honour *and* his reputation that the information was true. Messrs. Lucas and Lucas, after a long and searching examination—prompted, as Martin explained, by jealousy—decided that it would be worth while to send someone to the land of the Montezumas to follow up this clue; and who so fit for such

following as the starter thereof himself? He knew both the parties by sight, and, being a lawyer, could serve the citations, and prove their service in such a way as to leave no loophole open for objection. Wickham Martin was obviously the 'someone' to be sent, and sent he was, with an open credit for expenses.

He went to a fashionable tailor and ordered several suits of clothes. He provided himself with a dressing-case—silver-mounted—a revolver, an express rifle, a field-glass, an elaborate despatch-box, and other articles suitable for a gentleman on his travels, together with a supply of hosiery enough for three, and started on his quest, which he conducted leisurely.

His reports were quite literary productions—somewhat discursive and flowery, but in the main point conclusive. After

describing the scenery on the Texas and Pacific Railway, and giving a sketch of the Aztec dynasty, the fall of Maximilian, and the origin of the 'Monroe Doctrine,' he came to the point. He found Dick and Lady Gault living together as man and wife in a lovely ranch—over the beauties of which he lingered with poetic fervour—near Monterey. Dick was swinging in a hammock smoking lazily; Lady Gault was busy training a rose-bush—botanical name of the rose given in full—when he introduced himself. At the production of the papers the lady nearly fainted, and cried: 'Oh, Dick! will this separate us?' to which he replied with a laugh: 'Not a bit; it's just what we want.'

'He then,' Martin wrote, 'nearly poisoned me with an odious native fluid called "Pulque," but repented, and gave

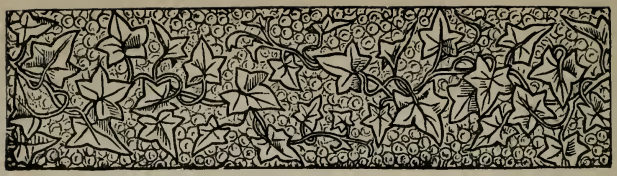
me some excellent English bottled ale to take the taste out of my mouth. They were passing as Mr. and Mrs. Arnold, appeared to be very happy and contented in their new home, and informed me that they had not the slightest intention of opposing the divorce proceedings, which, indeed, they regarded as a blessed deliverance.'

So the case of *Gault* v. *Gault and Birkett* was set down for hearing at last, and in the undefended list. Society had forgotten all about it, and never cared much. Lady Gault—married three months after her presentation, and carried off into Hopshire—made no mark in the fashionable world. Dick was a country lad, and baronets like Sir Claude were cheap. The case made no stir. About five inches of the *Times* sufficed to report it. The only

item of interest was the appearance of Mary Martin. The gravity of the occasion suited her style of beauty, and she had the honour of having her likeness sketched by a popular Q.C. who was waiting for the next cause.

The usual decree was pronounced, and in six months, if nothing happened—and what could happen now?—Sir Claude would be a free man.

No damages or costs were asked against the co-respondent, for the excellent reason that he had not any property within the jurisdiction of the Court upon which these could be levied.



CHAPTER XIII.

'IT HAS BEGUN.'

MR. AND MRS. MACGRUTHER were now fairly settled in their London house, and the bride's mother found that the axiom,

'My son's my son till he gets him a wife;
My daughter's my daughter all the days of her life,'

has exceptions. Poor Fanny had submitted to maternal rule as though she had never sworn to give up all her relations, and did nothing without consultation with 'dear mamma.' Bertha was made of sterner stuff, and showed signs of insubordination immediately upon her return from the honeymoon trip. She would

listen with a sweet smile to 'dear mamma's' instructions about furnishing and housekeeping and servants, and so on, and then go and do exactly as she pleased. Advised to be very quiet just at present, lest people might be set talking about her unfortunate sister, she accepted every invitation she received, and gave three large dinner-parties and a ball on her own account.

'It isn't catching, my dear,' she replied to Mrs. Heath's expostulations; 'and Alex agrees with me that we should not go into mourning about it. We are not responsible for my sister's unfortunate marriage.'

'No,' said her mother, nettled at the taunt; 'and if you had been given your way, you would not be responsible for your own.'

Bertha laughed.

'Don't you see that, not having had it quite on that occasion, I am entitled to have it now and evermore?'

'Take care that it is your husband's way too. You can't play the fool with Macgruther.'

'No, dear; I play the *wife*,' she replied languidly. 'When Alex finds fault with anything I do, he will tell me.'

Then it was that Mrs. Heath mentioned Corporal Byngton and the lost bracelet for the first time, because she had not dared to write upon the subject, lest Macgruther might see the letter. The whole story was told, the narrator watching carefully to see where it might pinch. It did not pinch at all. Bertha listened with an expression of freedom till the misdeeds of the under-housemaid were mentioned. Then she laughed.

'See now,' she observed, 'what a scrape she might have got me into! Why, they might have said that *I* went out.'

'To tell you the truth, my love,' said her mother, 'we half feared, at first, that you *had* done so.'

'For what, please?'

'We thought perhaps that, in a moment of folly, you might have consented to wish one of your old admirers good-bye.'

'Ridiculous! I wished them all good-bye in the most practical manner at church next day. By-the-by, where *is* my bracelet? George and Archie gave it to me, and I'm rather fond of it.'

Now, I will not even suggest that Mrs. Heath was worming at a secret for the purpose of holding it *in terrorem* over her daughter. The idea did not go that far, but she was in hopes of finding a hole, or

even a loose stitch, in Bertha's tailor-made self-complacency, and thus render her less —what her young brothers would call— 'cocky.' She failed, and, upon the whole, was rather glad of it.

This, I have said, was the first time Mrs. Heath had mentioned the bracelet-finding to Bertha. It was not, however, the first time that Bertha had heard about it, and this may account for the want of interest with which she listened. Her original informant was her maid, Pritchard. This young person (soon after the Macgruthers had returned from the Continent) called upon her old fellow-servants at Winchester Gardens, and naturally heard the news. She came back in anger and in tears, and told her young mistress all about it, including, of course, how she had been accused of letting in the tender-hearted,

but larcenous, under-housemaid at midnight.

'And, oh!' she sobbed, 'it's a sin and a shame! Me! with ten years' good character—to mix *me* up with a thief!'

Bertha agreed with her warmly. It *was* a shame, and there followed much questioning as to who was to be held responsible for it, with the usual result. No one could say that he or she had actually seen her open the front door—no one had seen her in the hall. Everybody had heard that somebody else had said so and so, and indignantly repelled the authorship of the scandal. This being so, Bertha cooled down and comforted the still weeping waiting-maid.

'You might as well try to catch an eel out of a pond with your bare hand, as to trace such trash as this to its inventor. *I*

am quite satisfied with you, Pritchard, and desire that there may be no more fuss about the matter.'

She quoted the old French proverb, and there it ended.

When the subject came up again, *viâ* Mrs. Heath, and that lady asked how it happened that Pritchard did not miss the bracelet, Bertha had an opportunity of defending her favourite attendant. She remembered how tired the poor girl was with all her hard work that day. The idea of her sitting up for an under-housemaid was ridiculous.

'And, dear mamma,' she concluded, 'I wish, when you have a chance, you'd say a kind something or other to Pritchard about this, as it annoyed her greatly.'

This was spoken much more like Bertha Heath than Mrs. Macgruther.

When it became possible that the divorce case would not be tried after all, owing to circumstances already narrated, this mother and daughter were brought together closely, and the latter began to take an interest in the proceedings which she had not evinced before. The former found comfort in being able to relieve her mind aloud respecting the idiotic behaviour of Sir Claude Gault, the criminal negligence of the Queen's Proctor, and the general depravity of all concerned. Thus Bertha got all the facts at her fingers' ends, and delivered herself philosophically from time to time.

'There is nothing to fret about,' she would say. 'It isn't our fault, and we're not in it. How many people do you suppose remember that Lady Gault was once Fanny Heath? Outside the family, I

should say about twenty-five, out of four millions. And it doesn't matter with these, as it used to do when you were a girl. Things have changed since then, dear mamma. People are not supposed to play the martyr now. If we are in pain, we take chloral. If we like someone better than we do our husbands, we take him. It is understood. When I say "we," I am speaking of our world, and not of myself. I think this is not only wicked, but cowardly; and some day I intend to fight it. In the meantime, as it works for our good, we will take advantage of it. If we do not allow anyone to imagine that we are ashamed of ourselves, there will be nothing shameful about it.'

* * * * *

Sir Claude Gault spent the greater part of his probation at Broadstairs, where he

entertained Mr. and Miss Martin for some ten days. Anyone conversant with the relations which had existed between the latter and Stephen Spaulding at Fairlock would have been surprised at the change which marked their demeanour during this period. True, that the 'private solicitor' and his daughter were guests, and the ex-stud-groom still held the position of a servant; but this did not fully account for it, because the 'private solicitor' and the actual valet were on terms of closest intimacy. Miss Mary's health had not been good lately. The doctor said she was 'run down,' and wanted bracing up. That was one reason why she had come to Broadstairs. The other one will surprise you. It was to ratify her engagement to Sir Claude Gault, and fix a day for the marriage.

Profound study of proverbial philosophy

has armed me against those pesky people who pelt a proverb at you as a clincher in argument. Set me up one of these wise saws, and I will undertake to knock it down (like a ninepin) with another. In this case you may quote: 'Happy is the wooing that is not long a-doing.' To which I reply, 'Marry in haste, and repent at leisure,' and down you go! If there was any wooing, I cannot say where Sir Claude pressed his second suit. He never left the house or its gardens.

Mary spent most of the day wandering alone and aimlessly on the beach; and what the wild waves said to her must have been sad to hear, judging by the lines it drew upon her face. But it was done somewhere. The decree which would make Sir Claude Gault a free man

was expected in due course on Monday, and the following Thursday was to find him again in matrimonial bondage.

When this was known, the great world (male) put its tongue in its cheek and sniggered: '*That* accounts for it!' The great world (female) raised its hands in holy horror: 'Her own maid! The wretch!' it cried.

Their wedding was quite private, by special license (no cards), at the Charing Cross Hotel. The bride, accompanied by her father, came up the same morning from Fairlock. Sir Claude and his man arrived at about the same time from Broadstairs. The settlements (prepared by the bridegroom's 'private solicitor') were signed and the knot tied. Shortly afterwards Sir Claude executed his will (also prepared by his 'private solicitor)

and it was witnessed by the clergyman and a waiter.

An air of dry business prevailed. The bridegroom appeared to be in good health, but had a dejected, hang-dog look about him. Mary's beautiful Irish blue eyes were dim with tears. The only one who seemed to enjoy the proceedings was the 'private solicitor.' Mr. Spaulding did not appear. He had been sent to the Manor House to take his former sweetheart's place as caretaker; and he, too, was fretful, and had an anxious look on his wooden face for many a day.

The (officially) happy pair started for the Continent by the tidal train, but, unlike so many of their newly-married predecessors on that route, did not break the journey at Folkestone or Dover after the manner of their kind. They went

straight on to Paris, and descended at the Hôtel du Louvre, where an unusually large suite of rooms had been engaged for them. They were not suspected of recent matrimony; indeed, an English-speaking *femme de chambre* (who had served as chambermaid in London, and was specially detailed to wait on distinguished Britons) declared that she knew well mi lord Gault, and he had been married a long time.

Ten days afterwards Mr. Spaulding received this laconic telegram:

'It has begun.—MARY.'

He threw his hat in the air—a most unnatural ebullition for so dry a man. 'She has kept her word,' he chuckled, as he brushed the dust from his recovered

head-gear. '*Begun*—has it? Well, then it will be over before the month is out.'

Before the month was out the following appeared in the column of deaths:

'*At Paris, on the* 29*th ult., Sir Claude Gault, Bart., of Fairlock Manor, Hopshire. Aged* 28.'

Horace (now Sir Horace) Gault brought his brother's body home, and buried it with some pomp in the great tomb of his race in Fairlock Churchyard. Mr. Barbour performed the funeral service with (as the local paper said) 'deep feeling.' When the will was read, it appeared that the dear departed, after making a few legacies, had left his wife (in addition to two thousand a year under her marriage settlement) every penny and every acre

and brick that he could dispose of. This included the Manor House. And all for herself *absolutely*, without any deduction in case she married again!

The legacies were: A thousand pounds to his brother Horace; five hundred pounds to the respected tutor of his youth—the Reverend J. Barbour; the same to his dear father-in-law, Wickham Martin; two hundred to his faithful servant, Stephen Spaulding; and a hundred scattered in sums of ten and twenty pounds amongst other domestics.

On the Sunday following the funeral, the second-named legatee preached the funeral sermon of his 'beloved pupil'; and it was not an easy work to compose. He had to skim lightly over much that was still fresh in the memory of his congregation, and make the most of his subject's

respect for spiritual pastors and masters (five hundred pounds' worth !), his generosity, and his reform. It was not necessary to mention his relapse, which *began* ten days after his marriage, or to utter the ugly word which was on the doctor's certificate of death.

This (translated from the French) was *delirium tremens*.

CHAPTER XIV.

BIRTHS, DEATHS AND MARRIAGES.

Six years have passed, and many things have happened since Dick Birkett disappeared. Taking them in their order of sequence, Mary, Lady Gault, returned to her first love, and became plain Mrs. Spaulding. She would not be called 'my lady,' though pressed by her father to keep up the family dignity. Anything which recalled her life at Fairlock was distressing to her, and nothing would induce her to reside at the Manor House. She preferred to live abroad, and her husband

amused himself by keeping racehorses, and running them at French and Italian meetings. As he was to the manner born, sported on business principles, and was a match for his trainer, he did not lose money. These pursuits kept him a good deal away from his wife and family (for Mary was twice a mother), but they seemed to get on very well with each other—apart.

Mary has aged and faded. The violet fire has gone out of her eyes, the sea-shell pink and white of her skin have 'run,' and there are threads of silver in her once raven-black hair. And there is something radically wrong with her nervous system, which represents an annuity to several eminent physicians.

The five hundred pounds bequeathed to Mr. Wickham Martin by his first son-in-

law seemed to go a long way. He established an elegantly-furnished apartment in Paris (Rue Siren), set up a mail phaeton, gave 'little dinners,' backed racehorses, and played baccarat. This lasted for about two years, and now we find him living with his daughter at Dieppe in (so far as he is concerned) a very moderate way. He will tell you that he has given up society for the sake of his poor dear child. His poor dear child can say (if she pleases) how much this reclamation has cost her—in cash.

Fairlock Manor House is now the country seat of the Right Hon. Alexander Macgruther, whose political (you see he is of the Privy Council) and social success (thanks to his wife) are accomplished facts.

For Bertha has indeed established a

salon—not such a potent one as that over which Madame de Lansdoff presided, but still a *salon;* and as in the realms of the blind the one-eyed man is king, it had its influence in still unregenerate London, and its mistress is a power in the land. She began by making things unpleasant for the chappies, and the mashers, and the Johnnies, by getting several attractive young matrons of her order to join her in laughing at them. Chappie, for example, would be told confidentially that Masher was really too stupid for anything; and Masher would learn that Chappie and Johnnie had been struck out of invitation lists because they were 'no use.'

No use! Heavens and earth! They, the flowers of their flock, the adored of the Gaiety, the glass of (concert hall) fashion, and the mould of (shirt-front and collar)

form, no use! 'Was the woman dewanged?'

Married ladies matrimonially unattached were not obliged by invitations, in town or country, for their usual escorts. Our reformers made a dead-set against the 'usual escort,' and so got rid of several amongst the usually escorted.

During her honeymoon trip Bertha had learned the convenience of knowing foreign languages, and on her return worked hard at them one after another. So the time came when she was a *persona gratissima* at the embassies, and when any distinguished visitors arrived it was, 'We will take you to Mrs. Macgruther; she is charming, and speaks Italian' (or German or Spanish, as the case might be).

This gave her the pull over her set, and placed her at its head. A few favoured

ones were permitted to call her 'Mrs. Mac' to her face, and a great many others spoke of her by this abbreviation. This pleased her, for she was aware that in bygone days two great ladies who had filled the throne to which she aspired had been known affectionately, one by the first, and the other by the last, syllable of her name.

Noblesse oblige was her adopted motto. No peer of the realm or other titled person was safe if he did not conduct himself like a gentleman. He was not permitted to show himself publicly between the *grande* and the *demi monde*. One very smart delinquent—a setter of fashions and leader of cotillons, and so on—was cut because, in the presence of 'Mrs. Mac,' he recognised a fair equestrian who had disqualified herself notoriously for service in the Temple of Vesta.

This was made what the lawyers call 'a test case.' The cotillon man called his friends together in social caucus, and it was resolved to boycott 'Mrs. Mac' by keeping all the regular dancing men away from her ball. Now, a very Illustrious Personage was to be present at this function with his wife and daughters; and, having a world-wide reputation for doing the right thing in the right time and the right way, he gave out, when he heard of this plot, that anyone who kept away in the interest of the cotillon man might find himself excluded thereafter from entertainment within the sphere of his (the I.P.'s) influence. This settled it. The bottom of the boycott fell out, and the dancing-men came thick and early.

Nor was this the only good result. Many a noble matron with frisky sons

patted Bertha on the back, and an influential section of her husband's constituents—serious people, who had blamed him for encouraging his wife's worldly pursuits — swung right round to her side.

Even the poor defeated cotillon man managed to crawl back. He intimated through a mutual friend that 'Mrs. Mac' had really been too hard upon him. It was all a mistake. He had seen a face he knew approaching, and instinctively raised his hat. If he had thought for an instant, he never would have done such a thing —never!

Her father (Mr. Heath) had come into his title, and was now Lord Strathfolia. It annoyed him greatly that his son-in-law should have rented Fairlock Manor House, when he could have bought East Denne

(rented by Colonel Daly), only three miles off. It was really unkind, he thought, of Bertha not to have influenced her husband in the matter; for the Strathfolia coronet sadly required regilding, there was a big house in Scotland which *must* be kept up, East Denne was a white elephant, and what a load of mortgage might be paid off with the money it would bring!

Now, Bertha had used her influence in this matter, and all in favour of the Manor House.

'My dear Alex,' she said, 'it is all very well trying to please papa, but the first thing, I think, is to please *me*. East Denne is a *house*, and there are fifty like it anywhere. Fairlock is a *place*. You can't match it unless you buy Haddon Hall, and that's not for sale. Besides,

you know, there is always trouble when one buys of one's own people. We should surely have rows about the roof, or the drains, or something. We shall have to invite dear mamma once a year at least, and how could she help interfering in a house which was once her own, and in which I was a baby? No; if I cannot have Fairlock, I'll do without a country-house. We can go to the seaside or abroad as usual, and perhaps that will be best, after all, for the boys.'

There are two small Macgruthers now, aged five and four respectively, and the lake we know of has a four-feet-high wire-netting all round it for their benefit.

Sir Horace Gault did all he could to upset his brother's will, which was, to his mind, redolent of undue influence very

craftily exercised. It read like the will of a grateful and generous man, and consequently he felt sure it had been dictated. He knew that the person therein described as 'the respected tutor' of his youth had been habitually spoken of by the testator as 'that —— old fool.' He knew he himself would never have been left a shilling on account of brotherly love. The difficulty was to impress this on others. His own legal advisers shook their heads. It was not an improper will upon its face, they said. At the time of its execution Sir Claude was a reformed man—that was an all-important point. And if influence had been used, he (Sir Horace) was one thousand pounds the richer for it, according to his own showing. Asked what was a thousand pounds towards keeping up a baronetcy, they replied that the de-

ceased, having just married a young wife, could not be supposed to consider his brother as his heir.

So no action was brought; but Sir Horace stuck to his own convictions with the bull-dog tenacity of his race. He felt that there was foul play somewhere. Why did his brother marry Mary Martin? Why, if he was so infatuated about her as his will seemed to imply, could she not have done as much as Spaulding did to keep him sober? Why had he (Sir Claude) relapsed almost immediately after his marriage? He had a watch set on Mary (Lady Gault), in case she might present an heir, real or pretended, and took nothing for his pains.

Lord Wadehurst continued his instructions to her Majesty's Government, and partly out of pity for the loss of his heir,

and partly as a sop, he was sent on an ornamental embassy to invest somebody with something, and raised a step in the peerage, which did not cost much, as he was understood to have no heir and his earldom would die with him. He held it for nearly four years, and when he died people said he was a very able man, and might have done something if he had only had a little common-sense. No mention of Dick was made in his will, though he had reasons (which he kept to himself) to believe that this malefactor was still with the minority. He was disinherited so far as the entail would allow. It gave the testator some pleasure to think that the new Earl would be a pauper with a white elephant in the shape of Wadehurst House on his hands.

Most of the property went to two sisters

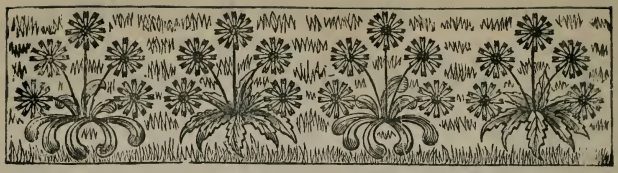
of the deceased whom he detested—one for marrying against his wishes, the other for not marrying at all—and there were liberal legacies to charitable institutions in the county and London. For Dick there remained the house and the ground on which it stood (about six acres), with the lordship of the manor, worth exactly forty-five pounds six shillings and twopence a year, until some leases, terminating in 1923, should fall in.

And there was no Dick or any sign of him. What, then, was to be done with the house? If it had not been for an old chum, who took upon himself the responsibility of farming out the kitchen-garden and applying the proceeds to pay a caretaker, it would have been given over to the rats and the bats.

This friend in need was the son of that

Dr. Crawford in whose charge poor Frank had died.

Mrs. Goodlake is alive and hearty, and has not given up her fond hope of having it out with *that* Spaulding.



CHAPTER XV.

DORMOUSE.

HAVING thus accounted for a six years' lapse, I will take up the thread of my story. The 'silly season' is in its prime. The daily newspaper having the largest circulation has set one of its usual social problems, and is full of letters pro and con, the writers abusing each other as is their wont. Smart people say that there is not a soul in London, but have to look out for themselves when—'passing through'—they cross the Strand. A cab containing an elderly lady, a young and

very pretty girl, and numerous brown-paper parcels indicating a recent visit to the 'stores,' is delayed in the desert of crowd, and pulls up at the Charing Cross Station barely in time to catch a departing train. Fortunately, the young lady has a return ticket, but is sadly encumbered with her load. The elder one (who is not going), whom she calls 'auntie,' being flustered, is of little help.

Time is up; the guard's whistle is at his lips when they reach the platform. He opens the first door at hand, and hustles the girl and her belongings in.

'Oh, but this is a smoking-carriage!' she pleads.

'Can't help it, miss,' says the man. 'Get in, or you can't go at all.'

'Heavens, auntie! my rugs!' she cries again.

The guard snatches them from the bearer. The train is moving. He follows it at a run, and throws the bundle through the window. It falls on the floor at her feet—and *squeaks!*

The only other occupant of the carriage is a very sunburnt gentleman, rather good-looking, and about six or eight and twenty years of age. The sudden entrance of his travelling companion, and the unnatural squeak of her rugs, dispel all reserve.

'Good gracious!' he exclaims, 'there must be something alive in them.'

'Oh yes, there is' (almost crying), 'and he must be horribly hurt!'

She quickly unfastens one end of the roll, and out comes a very smart little Yorkshire terrier, who is too disgusted to shake himself.

'He is the best little thing in the world,' explains his mistress (for really an explanation was in order); 'but he cannot bear the dog-box, and becomes a perfect fiend if he thinks he is going to be taken there—bites the porters, and gets me into, oh! such a lot of trouble. So, you see, I am *obliged* to smuggle him; but I have a dog-ticket,' she adds quickly, to save her reputation for honesty.

Such a bright little face is hers, set in soft brown hair, and lit with kind brown eyes! Derangements of her ulster, caused by the unrolling of the rugs, reveal a brown dress fitting to perfection a perfect figure. She might have posed for 'ye nut-brown maide.' She gives one rather startled look at the man, and then settles herself in her own corner.

'It was an ugly fall,' says the man.

'He doesn't seem much hurt, though. Come here, you rat' (to the fallen), 'and let me feel your ribs.'

The little dog obeys, goes up to him, sniffs him, jumps on his knee, and is rolled about in his hands playfully, trying to lick his face.

'He's all right,' is the verdict.

'Thank goodness—yes,' she replies; 'but you must not call him a *rat*. He is a Boodler.'

Now, Boodle was a dog owned years ago by Dick Birkett, and his progeny—more or less legitimate—had bred and mustered around Wadehurst. It was a great thing to own a real Boodler, and they were sought and promised (in advance) to the third and fourth generation.

'Then you're from Wadehurst?' the man asked.

'Yes.'

'You wouldn't have told me that this' (patting him) 'was a Boodler unless you thought I knew what a Boodler was.'

'No, indeed,' with a perplexing smile.

'Perhaps I am taking a liberty, but—you puzzle me. May I ask a question?'

'Certainly.'

'Do you know who I am?'

She looked him straight in the face with her pretty honest eyes, and said:

'You are Dick—I beg your pardon—Lord Wadehurst. I thought I recognised you at first, but I was sure when you took Tip up and teased him. You always used to do so with little dogs, holding their heads under your chin, and not letting them kiss your face.'

'I am ashamed,' said Dick sadly (for Dick it was), 'to have forgotten one who remembers me so kindly.'

'Oh, but, you see, I knew very few people,' she replied, 'whilst you—and I was only a little girl. Oh, I am not hurt at all. It is quite natural.'

'Look here' (cheerily). 'Let's have fair play! You say you only *thought* you knew me, and were sure when I did something you remembered. Now you do something that *I* may remember, won't you?'

She rose quickly, blushed, and sat down again.

'No,' she said; 'I'm too big now. I couldn't do it.'

'Well, then, tell we what it is.'

'If I were to curl myself up sideways in this corner with my feet under me, dig

my head into the cushion and read, what would you say?'

'*Dormouse!*' he exclaimed, delighted. 'No one but Dormouse!'

'Yes, you used to call me so when I was a child, but you know papa——'

'Bother papa! You are Dormouse' (seizing both her hands, and seating himself by her side), 'and I take it as the best of good omens that you are the first of the old set to meet and know me. We were always such good friends, weren't we?'

'You were very kind to us all.'

'But you were my special pet, with your dear quiet ways and your big heart. Do you remember that day when I was—was hurt at Fairlock?'

'We mustn't speak of that,' she said uneasily.

'Well, perhaps you're right. Let's talk of something pleasant. Tell me everything.'

She smiled.

'Everything is rather wide, isn't it? Where am I to begin?'

'I know,' he answered, 'that my dearest Frank is dead; that I have inherited a title, and am a pauper; that I am accused——' here he pulled up. 'I only landed the day before yesterday, so there's nothing you can tell me that will not be news.'

She told him what had passed within her view—much of which you know—and local gossip galore. How Jinks, the miller, had failed, poor man! and old Mrs. Rawlins had married again. (Dick flinched at this name, for it was not a savoury one.) How the Nethercliffs had moved, and the Rolfs

had taken their house ; and three new shops —quite nice ones !—had been opened at Poundbridge ; and so forth and so on. Asked about her own people, she had bad news. Her eldest brother had got into trouble at Oxford, and cost poor papa a great deal of money, which was so strange, considering he was intended for the Church, and had been brought up so strictly. Dick didn't think it strange at all. He knew in what sort of harness young Barbour had been driven all his boyhood, and was not surprised at his kicking over the traces and bolting at the first opportunity. But he did not say so.

By this time rain, which had been threatening when the train started, began to pour down resolutely, and the early autumn evening darkened into night.

'You will have a wet drive home,' said

Dick. 'I suppose your father will meet you?'

'I am not going to Fairlock,' she replied; 'I am staying at Wood End.'

Dick's heart sank. He knew Wood End as a select seminary for young ladies, presided over by the Misses James. Old Mr. Barbour's income was small, his family numerous; his son had been extravagant, and Dormouse was at Wood End. Dear gentle Dormouse a governess, at the mercy of dull-headed and saucy-lipped daughters of shop and farm!

'You haven't asked me a word about myself,' he said, to change the subject. 'Don't you care to know?'

'I hope you have been well and—and happy,' she said; but her eyes did not meet his as usual when she spoke.

'I have twice been as near death's door

as a man can well be and get back into life; and I have had many ups and downs —particularly downs. Happy? Well, I don't know. It depends upon what you call happiness. Perhaps I have been—sometimes. Anyhow, I've seen lots of the world, learned plenty of hard lessons, made some good friends, and if I have an enemy, I'm sorry for him. I'm in for peace and quiet now.'

She looked at him then, and there were tears in her eyes. This was the man whose name, by stern parental decree, was not to be mentioned in Fairlock, and she had only a dim idea of the reason why. But he was Dick, the hero of her childhood! and with the instincts of her sex she foresaw disappointment and sorrow for him.

They were now nearly at the end of

their journey. Dick tied her parcels together deftly, so that one hand could hold them all, and prepared to repack Tip in his rugs, but met with objections on his part.

'Oh!' laughed his mistress, 'he knows that he is all right now. They won't interfere. It's only in London they are so strict.'

'Of course there is a fly ordered for you?' he asked, as the train stopped. 'If not——'

Here his good offers were interrupted. Something in a waterproof, with the hood up, fell upon Stella Barbour and kissed her, and bore her away swiftly.

Dick had some trouble about his luggage, which was in the wrong van, and he saw no more of Dormouse. He had not even a chance to say 'Good-bye.'

All the railway people, from the station-master down, were strangers to Dick. He went through to the outside platform to find the fly he supposed to be awaiting him. There was no carriage of any sort. The town 'bus had just left. He stood alone in the dark and the rain, and shivered.

This railway had been made at a time when towns were shy of the iron horse. The station which served Wadehurst was a mile and a half from its main street, and nearly three miles from 'the House.' It had gathered around it a few labourers' cottages, and the inevitable Railway Inn—a too pretentious affair, which did little business out of the local County Court, where most of its proprietors had figured as bankrupts. For some time past it had been little more than a 'tap,' but it gener-

ally—to Dick's knowledge—supported a fly. So he told the porter who followed him with his luggage to go and ask if a fly had been ordered for Lord Wadehurst

The man grinned.

'Why, bless your life,' he said, 'his lordship's been dead and buried this four year and more.'

'We won't argue the question,' Dick replied; 'go and ask.' And he put his hand in his pocket.

The answer came that 'no fly hadn't been ordered for nobody; but the gentleman could have it in a few minutes.'

It came round in half an hour.

'Wadehurst House,' said Dick to the driver, as he stepped in.

'Beg your pardon, sir,' observed the jehu; 'but there ain't no one there.'

'There will be when I arrive,' said Dick. 'Go on.'

They went on in the dark and the driving rain at the irritating *slippety-slop, slippety-slop* pace of the representative fly-horse, over a road that Dick had been accustomed to take in his dog-cart at a 2-45 pace. How slow now—how slow! He looked through the storm-blurred window for some landmark to show if they were getting on at all, but the black night hid even the hedges from his view. *Slippety-slop, slippety-slop!* Could the fellow have missed his way, or had the house moved into the next parish?

'Why the deuce,' he mused, 'couldn't Wainwright have met me at the station with some sort of decent trap? Stop—did I write station or house, or both? Perhaps I made a mistake about the train.

Anyhow, he'll be at the house and have some dinner ready. Confound the old shandrydan! the roof leaks. It's a regular shower-bath. Wonder if we've got to Wood End yet? Dear little Dormouse, she's housed and dry by this time, and eating her supper with the girls. Holloa! what's this?'

The *slippety-slop* has ceased; the jehu has crawled down from his perch and is opening some iron gates.

'By Jove! it's Wadehurst at last!'

CHAPTER XVI.

'HAIL TO THE CHIEF!'

THE fly lumbered up to the grand entrance of Wadehurst House, and Dick sprang up the steps. Jehu dragged his portmanteau into as dry a spot as could be found under the portico, and awaited events.

The house was as dark as a wolf's mouth. Not a gleam in any window; not a sign of life, much less of welcome.

Dick pulled the bell and heard its familiar clang! clang! loud and clear in the silence. He pulled again and again, and looked through the side-lights of the

great door. All within was dark—not a sound, not a movement.

'Well, this *is* pleasant!' he muttered aloud.

'Better go back, sir,' the jehu suggested. 'Told you there wasn't nobody here.'

'But there *must* be!' persisted Dick. 'I wrote—ah! they are coming now; I see a light in the hall. Here' (handing a liberal tip), 'I won't keep you waiting in such weather. Get yourself a glass of something hot.'

Jehu took the money and drove off, nothing loath.

The light (a very dim one) came on slowly. Sounds of drawing bolts and the putting up of the chain were heard. The door was opened four inches, and a shaky voice demanded:

'Who's there?'

'Lord Wadehurst.'

'That won't do. You'd better be off. I—I ain't alone, and we've got a gun.'

'Oh, don't be so stupid! Is Mr. Wainwright here?'

'Mr. Wainwright!' scoffed the voice. 'That won't do, neither. Old Mr. Wainwright's sick abed at Maidstone 'sizes; and Mr. Joe, he's with him, as everybody knows. You don't come over *me* with your Mr. Wainwright, so be off, or it'll be the worse for you! You ain't the only tramp as has tried this little game, and so I tell you.'

'My good man,' Dick pleaded, 'I am not a tramp. I am Lord Wadehurst, *really*. I wrote to Mr. Wainwright to meet me at the station or here, and have things ready. I see now why he could not come.

I have sent away my fly, and you must let me in.'

'I shan't do nothing of the sort—be off!'

'Idiot!' murmured Dick to himself; then aloud, 'Open the door; look at me, and satisfy yourself. It's quite right of you to be careful, but this is absurd.'

'Oh yes, open the door for you and your pals to bust in. Not much!' scoffed the voice.

'I am alone. I give you my word of honour I will not attempt to enter till you are satisfied that I am Lord Wadehurst.'

'I never set eyes on any Lord Wadehurst, so how can I tell?'

'Good heavens!' moaned Dick, 'what is to be done?'

'Go on about your business. I ain't a-going to stand here talking any more.'

Here the door was shut.

'Stop! stop!' shouted Dick. 'You say you are not alone. Is there anyone there' (loudly) 'who knows me—Mr. Dick that was?'

A female voice—still more shaky than the male—now whispered:

'I used to know him. Oh, John! if it were really Mr. Dick!'

'Land at last!' exclaimed the out-barred joyfully. 'A woman! We shall have some sense now. What is your name, please—you who said you used to know Mr. Dick?'

'Mrs. Killick.'

'Don't remember any Mrs. Killick. Is this man with the gun your husband?'

'Yes, he is.'

'Hum! Where did you know me?'

'If you be Mr. Dick, in this very house.'

'Were you a servant?'

'Yes, and my mother before me.'

'And your name before you married this—this Mr. Killick?'

'Don't you tell him,' said her husband. 'He'll try to gammon us by pretending to remember you.'

'Hush, John! I seem to know the voice. I do believe in my bones he is—— I'll tell you one of them' (to the outsider) —'it's Patsey; and I was once hurt, and Mr. Dick was awful good to me. Now, if you be truly Mr. Dick, who am I?'

He thought for a moment, and then shouted:

'Patsey? Why, of course!—Patsey Turpin! You were kitchen-maid. You burnt yourself badly one Christmas Eve, and I and Mr. Frank got you some carron-oil and lint and dressed your arm, and you

went home, and didn't come back for—oh, I don't know how long.'

'Get out of the way, you old stupid!' cried the voice, now strong and cheery. 'It's *him*. It's Mr. Dick, for sure; and he's my lord now. The idea of keeping him a-waiting in the rain at his own door! You ought to be ashamed of yourself, John Killick!'

So, to the light of a solitary 'dip,' guttering in a tin candlestick, Richard Birkett, second Earl and eighth Baron Wadehurst, entered his ancestral hall!

He looked around him. In the old lord's time there were ten duplex lamps burning at night in this hall, and they did not light it up properly. Holding the candle up above his head, his accustomed eye got vague outlines of the old armour, old pictures, and mouldering trophies of

the chase, just as he had left them. It was something like home, but the silence and the gloom chilled him.

'Never mind,' he told Patsey, profuse and incoherent with excuses. 'It isn't your fault there is nothing ready; only, please, get some better light, and I'll go to the Blue Room, where poor Mr. Frank and I——'

He could not finish.

'Oh dear! oh dear!' moaned Patsey. 'We've only one lamp, and that's in the kitchen. And as for the Blue Room, there ain't a stick of furniture in it!'

'Well, anywhere out of this vault—the small study.'

'And that's as bare as my hand.'

'What the deuce have you done with all the furniture? Where *can* I go?'

'There's no place but the kitchen,'

Patsey replied, with a sob of despair; 'and oh, my Lord Dick—I mean Mr. Wadehurst—no, no, I'm so flus—flustered, I can't get right. It's a ha—hard and a cru—cruel shame—on me—to have—to say so.'

So he was taken to the kitchen, where there was light and warmth, and consoled the sobbing woman.

'Can you give me anything to eat, Patsey?' he asked, when he had taken off his wet ulster. 'I'm as hungry as a wolf.'

'A rasher and fried eggs, and some toasted cheese, is all I can do.'

If she had offered sackcloth and ashes and Dead Sea fruit, she could not have spoken more mournfully.

'Splendid! Bring on your rasher and eggs, my good Patsey, and I'll do them justice,' said Dick.

When these delicacies were about half frizzled, he asked :

'Have you got the key of the cellar ?'

'Yes, my lord ; but there ain't anything there.'

'No wine ?'

'Not a single bottle.'

'This is very strange—no furniture in the rooms, no wine in the cellar ! What——'

'There, there now ! you eat your supper. The chaney closet's open, and I can get you a nice plate and glass ; and Mr. Sam Crawford, he sent us a cask of gentlefolks' cider only last week. Eat your supper like a—eat your supper.'

Seated on a Windsor chair, my Earl Wadehurst ate his first meal under his own roof-tree—ate his rasher and eggs

off a priceless Sèvres plate, with a black-handled knife and two-pronged fork; and drank his Hopshire cider from a Venetian goblet worthy of a place in any art collection. Then he lit a cigar and finished his question, 'What does all this mean?'

With some tears and many personal observations unflattering to their objects, and which must not be repeated here, she told him that a week after the old lord's funeral the executors had come with an auctioneer from Poundbridge and an old man who had been butler before her listener was born, and that they had taken a list of everything in the house—that the old butler had ticked off such things as he remembered, and that all the rest had been either sent to London or sold at auction on the premises. The

order was that any object which the late lord had inherited was to stay, and all else was to go—and they went.

'I understand,' said Dick bitterly. 'I wonder he didn't melt up the armour and sell it for old iron, whilst he could. What is there left, Patsey?'

'There's a-most everything in the hall and in the state bedroom where King William slept, and the big sideboard, and a lot of old oak stuff in the attic, and the Turkey carpet in the library, and some books; and' (brightening up) 'there's the family plate at the bank, and some odds and ends of chaney and glass like thickey' (indicating the plate and goblet), 'and that's about all; but what there is, Mr. Di—my lord, is as clean as the head of a new pin—that it is, for sure!'

'Why, of course—didn't you have it in

charge? But tell me, how did you come to have charge?'

Then she told him about Mr. Sam Crawford and the kitchen garden.

'So,' he mused, 'the only one to stick up for me was Sam! And those Wainwrights, who have made thousands and thousands out of us, never did a thing!'

'They was the executors' lawyers.'

'And went with the swim. But where's your husband? I hope I haven't scared him away?'

He had, though. Honest John Killick was in fear and tribulation. He had barred the Earl out of his own house and treated him as a tramp, and didn't know if it wouldn't be a 'sizes case. He was found, reassured, and given some tobacco such as he never smoked before.

He also had disagreeable news. How

the flower-garden was all overgrown with weeds, the pigsties gone to rack and ruin, and the roof of the dairy fallen in. But he had not known it otherwise, and could tell his tale without the tears which had sometimes choked the faithful Patsey. He was a Sussex man (he told Dick), from a small place near Petworth, and having been sent to Poundbridge Fair after some new harvester, had himself been gathered in by buxom Patsey. Yes, they had a good place, but lonely at nights. Tramps had tried to get in, and that was why, etc., etc. He wasn't afraid. Mr. Sam paid them 'handsome.' Patsey made something extra rearing chickens and ducks, and he did odd jobs for the farmers around. No, they had nothing to complain of.

His wife, who had disappeared at the beginning of this conversation, now re-

turned, and was met with the important question:

'Where am I to sleep? Is there any sofa or bench, or—I can rough it. I've slept many a night on the bare ground with my saddle for a pillow.'

'I've made up the state bed for you, my lord,' said Patsey quietly.

'The state bed! Ghosts of all the Wadehursts, wherever you may be, rest easy this night! The state bed, sacred to the memory of Sailor Bill's snores! This is desecration, Patsey! I'm not sure it isn't high treason!'

'But it's quite clean, sir—my lord. It is indeed! The sheets don't quite go across it, and there's only one blanket; but if you don't mind using your railway rug——'

'Patsey' (with warning finger at her

face), 'you've been stripping your own room!'

'No, indeed; I'd plenty of good linen when I married—hadn't I, John? And I'll get you a wash-bowl and things before you're up in the morning, and borrow some proper knives and forks for breakfast.'

This was the coming home of the heir!

END OF VOL. I.

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